

## **A Distant Dream:**

### **The Chinese Aesthetics of Balthus and Henri Michaux**

#### **Introduction**

Both artistic figures whose careers span twentieth-century France but who were notably detached from the major artistic movements of their time, both shrouded in the enigma of their works that frustrate interpretation and their personal lives that remained invisible to the public gaze, the Polish-French painter Balthus (1908-2001) and the Belgian-French artist-poet Henri Michaux (1899-1984) share yet another commonality: both had a lasting love for Chinese painting and literature, and drew much inspiration therefrom. The constant echo of a seemingly Chinese aesthetics in Balthus's and Michaux's works gives rise to a few important questions. When manifested in specific visual forms, themes and ideas, how do Balthus's and Michaux's creative practices and works engage with and reinvent the Chinese aesthetic tradition? Will new understandings of Balthus and Michaux be revealed if we see them in light of certain Chinese notions about painting, calligraphy and poetic imagery? What would this say about the relation between artistic influence and creativity, and the transformation of aesthetic forms and ideas across cultures and time? These are the questions which this essay explores.

More specifically, I focus on two aspects of Balthus's and Michaux's works. Firstly, the theme of dream in Balthus, which has sparked much controversy and compromised Balthus's critical reception because his dream paintings are predominantly depictions of adolescent girls in settings and postures that strongly evoke or explicitly portray eroticism and child sexuality. Hostile critics such as Brink and Pieyre de Mandiargues have criticised Balthus's girls from a psychoanalytical approach relating them to Oedipal complex and rape desire,<sup>i</sup> whereas sympathetic critics such as Woods and Soby have insisted on formalist concerns, treating Balthus's paintings as an 'ontological category' separate from

reality and its moral debates.<sup>ii</sup> In this essay, however, I will approach these paintings from the perspective of dream imagery in Chinese literature, with which Balthus was familiar, and argue for an alternative reading of Balthus's dreaming adolescents that differs substantially from psychoanalytic and formalist readings. Via Balthus's Chinese references, I will also show how his landscape paintings connect to the theme of dream and surreptitiously echo his paintings of dreaming girls. Secondly, as for Michaux, I explore how China as an aesthetic vision resurfaces like a dream in his paintings and writings, nourished by his critical but ambiguous attempt to disengage himself from the French Orientalist tradition that fantasizes an exoticist China. How Michaux dreams of China in a non-Orientalist way will be considered in relation to both his writings about China and calligraphic ink paintings. I then reflect comparatively on how both Balthus and Michaux absorbed and reworked Chinese aesthetic forms and notions in a way that is distinctly different from Orientalist representations of the Far-Eastern Other that label it with fixed forms rather than allow for its transformation. Through these reflections, I argue finally that Balthus and Michaux not only are transformed by Chinese aesthetics but also actively transform it, making us rethink our understanding of Chinese aesthetics and artistic creativity.

### **The Transmission of Chinese Culture into Twentieth-century France**

Balthus and Michaux both grew up in a Europe that saw increasing transmission of and interest in Chinese culture. Especially in France, where the amount of knowledge about China becoming available, as well as its depth and accuracy, was unprecedented in comparison with previous centuries. Chinese imagery particularly attracted French artistic and literary circles, for it coincided with their quest for new aesthetics outside the European canon. This was no easy task, for it meant rinsing one's aesthetic vision of both European concepts of and taste for art and literature, and of the Orientalist stereotypes

about China which Europe had established since the previous centuries.

By the early twentieth-century, representations of China – often stereotyped and soaked in colonialist imagery – were already well-known to the French public. Chinoiserie, i.e. the stereotypical representation of China, had become an aesthetic norm and cultural label that was applied superficially to add some trendy exotic flavour. Chinoiserie was wide-spread in fashion, decorative arts, and exoticist travel writing about China characterised Chinese people as old sages, decadent opium eaters, or small doll-like women. Nevertheless, simultaneously, these facile Orientalist representations began to be increasingly challenged due to deepening knowledge about the complexity and heterogeneity of Chinese culture. Notably, scholarly studies and translations on a comprehensive range of topics in Chinese aesthetics, poetry, philosophical and religious traditions were produced by French sinologists such as Pelliot, Maspero, Granet and Demiéville. For example, *Mythologie asiatique illustrée*, a study of Asian visual culture spanning Persia to China and Japan appeared in 1928, with commentaries written by prominent scholars such as Maspero and Claude Maitre. These studies – written for a general educated public as well as specialists – were widely read outside the small sinological circle, and not least by the French intellectual and artistic milieux. The latter's perception of China thus found a point of departure from stereotypical Orientalist imagery. A critical awareness to resist chinoiserie 'vulgarisations' thus emerged,<sup>iii</sup> notably pioneered by Segalen's vehemently anti-Orientalist *Essai sur l'exotisme* (1904-18).

Balthus and Michaux were both fascinated by Orientalist imagery and aware of this Segalenian criticism of Orientalism. They were also immersed in the early twentieth-century atmosphere of revolt against the classical tradition, a crucial aspect of which was precisely the modernist aesthetic tendency for appreciating non-Occidental forms of expression. This trend was already championed by Gauguin at the fin de siècle, who, besides his extensive Polynesian paintings, famously declared that 'la grosse erreur, c'est le

Grec, si beau qu'il soit' ('the big mistake is Greek art, regardless how beautiful it is').iv

Gauguin was then cited enthusiastically by the surrealists, with Breton further advocating an anti-Europeanism that sought cultural rebirth from the Orient:

Pour ma part, il me plaît que la civilisation occidentale soit en jeu. C'est d'Orient que nous vient aujourd'hui la lumière. [...] La liquidation des influences méditerranéennes est en bonne voie et je ne peux que m'en réjouir.v

As for myself, I am pleased that western civilisation is at stake. Today light comes to us from the Orient. [...] The liquidation of Mediterranean influences is well underway and for that I can only rejoice.vi

Breton's admiration for the Orient and belief that it could lead to new ways of painterly and poetic imagination was shared by many of his contemporaries including Masson, Maillol, Artaud, Saint-John Perse, as well as Balthus and Michaux (though the latter two were quite indifferent to the cult of surrealism). The very invocation of Chinese aesthetics thus went, as Etiemble remarked, hand-in-hand with the pursuit of the experimental and non-European.vii A sinophilic trend that sought to break away from conventional artistic and literary expressions – including clichéd Orientalist art such as the academician paintings of Ingres and Gérôme – therefore emerged, in which Balthus and Michaux took part. In this context, I will consider how Balthus's and Michaux's works specifically relate to Chinese aesthetic forms, recreating it in subtle ways that avoid chinoiserie stereotypes.

### **Balthus's Dreams and Visions: Echoes of a roaming spirit**

La vraie modernité est dans cette réinvention du passé, dans cette originalité découverte à partir [des maîtres du passé], de leurs expériences, de leurs trouvailles.

True modernity lies in this reinvention of the past, in this originality discovered in [the old masters], in their experiences and their ideas.

— Balthusviii

Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, known as Balthus, stands as a *sui generis* artist who fits into none of the well-known twentieth-century artistic movements or styles, but was nevertheless 'an anti-modernist beloved of modernists, including Picasso'.ix Although he frequented Parisian avant-garde circles since the 1930s and was au fait with contemporaneous trends of surrealist, cubist and abstract art, his style is much closer to old masters such as Piero della Francesca and Poussin, with extreme emphasis on the delineation of form, restrained brushwork, and painterly technique. One commonality that Balthus shared with the Parisian avant-garde, despite their stylistic dissociation, was the fascination for images and artefacts coming from the Far-East. In particular, Balthus's interest in Chinese art and literature started early and had lasting influences on his artistic career, which Balthus acknowledges in his self-perception as a painter who is greatly nourished by literature from 'les grands textes saints, [...] les poètes de la Pléiade' to 'les grands Chinois' ('the great sacred texts, [...] the poets of the French renaissance Pléiade,' to 'the great Chinese texts').x In the following, I explore how Balthus's Chinese sources are both elusively and explicitly manifested in his paintings, especially through the motif of dream.

As a child, Balthus was already keenly interested in Chinese painting and literature, which he read in translation. As described by Rilke, close family friend of the Klossowskis, when visiting the fourteen-year-old Balthus in 1922:

When we went to see him at Beatenberg in September, he was just painting Chinese lanterns, with a flair for the oriental world of form that is amazing. [...] One can't imagine where he gets all his assured knowledge of Chinese

## Imperial and artistic dynasties.xi

At twelve years old, Balthus discovered the *Zhuangzi*, one of the founding texts in the Chinese poetic and philosophical canon and named after its alleged author Zhuang Zhou (ca. 370-287 BCE). The *Zhuangzi* was to become one of Balthus's dearest literary works, and he liked it so much that he illustrated episodes of its legendary author's life.xii The *Zhuangzi's* oneiric, mythical imagery and striking aesthetic sensibility left a deep imprint on Balthus's artistic vision and painterly expressions. This is most noticeably manifested, in my view, in the obsessively recurrent theme of dreams in Balthus's figure paintings.

The way Balthus treated dreams was distinctly different from major surrealist artists. Instead of excavating the interiority of the dreaming mind by depicting dreamscapes and sexual symbolism as Dalí and Yves Tanguy did, or displaying amorphous hybrid creatures that seem to have stepped out of the warped time-space of the unconscious à la Max Ernst or Dorothea Tanning, Balthus depicted dreams by focusing on the outward appearance of the dreamer and surface of the external world, depicted by realistic-looking objects and surroundings in different shades of light. This is manifest in many paintings, typically *Thérèse rêvant* (1938) (figure 1), *Le Salon* (1942) (figure 2), *Le Rêve I* (1955), *La Chambre* (1952/4), and *Nu endormi* (1980).xiii [insert figures 1 and 2 here] Almost always cast in the figure of the pubescent girl, Balthus's dreamers evoke the fragile and ambiguous transience when the child passes into adulthood. As one gazes at these pictures, however, one cannot help but feel intrigued by these adolescents' languid but suggestive poses and the general solipsistic atmosphere evoked through their closed eyes or complete oblivion of the audience. Why are these girls depicted in a way that keeps them impenetrable to the audience's gaze – an 'anti-narrative' style, in James Elkins's words, that tells no story but draws extreme attention to the objecthood of the girls as if they were still life?xiv What kind of experience are they having? How to deal with the perplexing question of the implied erotic fantasy between Balthus the painter and his

teenage models?

As mentioned, two main interpretive approaches to these pictures have been made: one psychoanalytic and biographical, probing and problematising ethical questions; another formalist, focusing on stylistic issues. According to the first approach, these paintings of girls dozing, dreaming, and sprawling in intimate domestic spaces are typically accused of libidinous interest and suspiciously regarded as borderline child pornography. For example, Brink casts Balthus in the light of a frustrated mother complex that results in his seeking recompensation from the fetish for young girls; Balthus's personal relationships with his teenage models has been scrutinised – especially the sixteen-year-old Laurence Bataille (Georges Bataille's biological daughter and Lacan's step-daughter), who was indeed Balthus's sexual partner besides model, – which further flared up the scandalous atmosphere around Balthus; the exhibition 'Balthus: Cats and Girls – paintings and provocations' at the Met from 2013-14, curated by Rewald, also fully played on these disturbing and interesting issues that sharpen public appetite. Balthus, on his part, has always denied any pornographic interest, and observed that eroticism for him has a religious, almost divine nature. To read too much of Balthus's personal psychology and experiences into his paintings is also what Balthus's self-perception as artist does not support, for he believed that art was not an expression of the self.<sup>xv</sup> Though we need not take the artist's authorial assertions as verdicts on his works, we can still hear it as one of the voices that can provide an alternative interpretation. One such alternative that is more in line with Balthus's self-perception is the formalist approach, which resists the view that direct connections between the painter's person and his artworks can be drawn. This approach insightfully relates Balthus's paintings to his contemporaneous artistic milieu and predecessors within the European – especially French – tradition of painting, with which Balthus engages in subtle dialogue. For instance, Woods argues that *Le Rêve* (1955), reworked over years, is an oblique response to Cubism, especially Picasso's *Le Rêve*

(1932).xvi Also, Balthus's figures' restrained 'wooden' poses echo the more traditional modernist Courbet, e.g. the two adolescents in *Le Salon* recognisably reference the two children in Courbet's *Proudhon et ses enfants* (1865).xvii Nevertheless, neither the formalist analogies of visual form nor psycho-biographical readings address the theme and mood of Balthus's dreamers. Often describing them as enigmatic and metaphysical, critics have not sufficiently explored exactly how and why they are so. Here, I take a perspective different from both approaches and argue that much can be discovered about Balthus's paintings by relating them to Chinese dream imagery, specifically found in the *Zhuangzi*, which Balthus was so fond of. The *Zhuangzi*'s recurrent discussions of experiences of dreaming, daydreaming, oblivion, and meditation could shed light on the strange and concentrated mood of Balthus's dreamers.

To start with, Balthus's obsession with the theme of dream finds its parallel in the *Zhuangzi* itself, because the text is not only scattered with anecdotes about dreams, fantastic and even surreal (to use the term anachronistically) images but also depicts the most famous dream scene in Chinese literature. This is the butterfly dream of Zhuang Zhou, the alleged author of the text:

Formerly Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly fluttering blithely around, happy with itself and doing as it pleased. It didn't know it was Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solidly and unmistakably Zhou. But was it Zhou who dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming it was Zhou? Between Zhou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the transformation of things. (*Zhuangzi* 2.14)xviii

The butterfly dream not only presents a metamorphosis via dreaming but also points to the thin line between different states of being Zhou and the butterfly. It emphasises the un-self-conscious and carefree Zhou-as-butterfly as it is absorbed in the pleasure of wandering around. This reveals a reverie-like roaming of one's spirit through different stages of



transformation and alternating realities, an experience that precisely abstracts the subject of experience from his conventional world and identity. Evoking ambiguous states of consciousness, this way of dreaming intersects with the reverie, namely, the waking dream. Note that upon waking, Zhou asks himself if his awakedness and its supposedly 'solid' reality are in fact dreamt by the butterfly. The question of the liminality between dream and awakedness is raised, which is further articulated in two other instances of dream-like experiences in the *Zhuangzi*: 'spiritual roaming' (*youxin*), and 'sit and forget' (*zuowang*).

'Spiritual roaming' (*youxin*) is the term used to describe the sage Lao Dan, who remained in a posture 'so motionless that he seemed non-human', his 'limbs and body being stiff like dried wood, as if he had abandoned everything and departed from man, standing in singularity' (*Zhuangzi* 21.4). When asked what he was doing, Lao Dan replied: 'I was letting my spirit roam [*youxin*] in the primordial state of things' (*Zhuangzi* 21.4). This wandering of one's thoughts and feelings indicated by *youxin* involves a self-abandonment that withdraws one's awareness of one's own body and world. The intriguing expression of being 'in the primordial state', complemented by Lao Dan's 'non-human' appearance, implies a state of experiential indifferentiation where the human mingles with everything else. The dislodging of one's definite form and identity in the butterfly dream happens here too, showing *youxin* to be a process of metamorphosis analogous to dreaming, only on a more intense level that borders trances induced by exceptional concentration. This concentrative aspect of *youxin* relates to another experience in the *Zhuangzi* that refers even more explicitly to meditative trance: to 'sit and forget' (*zuowang*). This is described by Yan Hui, the gifted disciple of Confucius, when he muses upon his self-cultivation and meditational practice: 'I let fall my limbs, dismiss my sight and hearing, leave my body and do away with knowledge, thus becoming one with the great pervasiveness, this is what I call "sit and forget"' (*Zhuangzi* 6.9). Here again, the conventional body, its sensory faculties and conscious thought are dissolved in the union

with an all-encompassing oneness, brought about by intense concentration. Note the notion of unobstructed movement in all three anecdotes: the carefree butterfly, the roaming spirit, the permeating oneness; and the esoteric terms that indicate an intimate private experience that is outwardly inaccessible: i.e. experience of the 'primordially' of things, the 'great pervasiveness'. The *Zhuangzi* thus highlights the esoteric quality of these dream-like experiences and the ability of the person experiencing them to go beyond the limitations of one's physical body and immediate world.

Could we not describe Balthus's dreamers by using these Zhuangzian notions of dream-like experiences? These dreamers are also, like Lao Dan and Yan Hui, poised motionless and frozen in time, savouring their inner experience and shutting out the world around them. The ambiguity of their state of consciousness is evoked through their facial expression, body surface and posture, but remains fundamentally inaccessible and uncertain, for we cannot see their thoughts and mental images. Nor are we sure that they are indeed dreaming, for they pose in a state of inertia like still-life objects, and could be experiencing anything from dreaming, sleep, torpor, to daydreaming, being engrossed in thought, or trance. Like the *Zhuangzi*, besides dreams that occur in sleep, Balthus also wants to draw our attention to the reverie or vision. This is conveyed by the portrayal of the girls being seemingly under a spell of self-absorption that renders them oblivious to their surroundings. For instance, the dreaming Thérèse (figure 1) seems more likely to be daydreaming than sleeping. Note her highly unrelaxed poise, with her arms lifted and hands balanced on her head, and one leg perched squarely on the chair, – these would not be realistically possible in real sleep or unconsciousness. Likewise, the unnatural, almost drug-induced pose of the girl on the sofa in *Le Salon* (figure 2) and the androgynous adolescent concentrating over a book in a most uncomfortable position suggest that, rather than exclusively emphasising the sleeping dream and distinguishing it from awakedness, Balthus's interest is in the *dream-like* state. This suggestive condition refers back to the

fleeting moment when the butterfly turns into Zhuangzi, the thin line between different states and beings, consciousness and unconsciousness, dream world and this world, adolescence and adulthood. Seen in this light, these adolescents' stiff and wooden postures become charged with an intense energy that emanates from their invisible interiority. They are not anti-narrative because below the surface, they are bubbling with stories about their intimate experiences, except that these narratives are not proffered to the viewer. Balthus depicts these adolescents not so much agents of various dreaming activities as fluid beings undergoing an all-absorbing experience like spiritual roaming (*youxin*) that suspends time and space. In this experience, they are abstracted from their concrete bodies and reality. To quote Steinberg on Picasso's *Sleepwatchers*, which can be equally said in Balthus's case, instead of being understood as 'persons engaged in watching and being watched', Balthus's dreamers are rather a '*figuration*' of instances of becoming.<sup>xix</sup> Like the *Zhuangzi*, Balthus's focus is not on the materiality of his dreamers' bodies but on the *beyond*-physical process they are undergoing. This understanding of Balthus's dreaming girls as contemplation of other-worldliness and religious mysticism is also one that the painter claims to aspire to: 'La peinture [...] est sans nul doute religieuse et donc spirituelle. [...] C'est rester au ras de choses matérielles que de croire à l'érotisme pervers de mes jeunes filles' ('Painting [...] is doubtless religious and therefore spiritual. [...] To assume there is a perverse eroticism in my adolescent girls is to stay at the level of material things').<sup>xx</sup> Balthus's evocation of the mystic and immaterial realm perhaps alludes to his reading of the *Zhuangzi*.

A more recognisably Zhuangzian reference in Balthus's work may be found in his *La Phalène* (1960) (figure 3), an intriguing painting of a girl reaching out towards a moth before a lamp. [insert figure 3 here] The nocturnal butterfly and dream-like vision presented by the painting carry strong connotations of the Zhuangzian dream. It is unclear whether this is a real scene or recollection of a dream, for the depiction is unrealistic in

several aspects. Firstly, the white moth, hovering precariously beside the lamp, is so delicately rendered that it is almost imperceptible. It glows like a spirit 'fascinated by the light' and seems so immaterial that we wonder if it is an apparition.<sup>xxi</sup> In contrast, barely noticeable and completely ignored by the girl, another moth – black and much more realistically painted – rests on the bedclothes in the lower section. As the *Zhuangzi* does, Balthus seems to suggest when he professes that he 'croi[t] à la dualité profonde des êtres' ('believes in the fundamental duality of beings'),<sup>xxii</sup> that dream and awakedness are not mutually exclusive perspectives – one fictional, the other real – but are in fact two co-existing realities. Secondly, the girl is unrealistically perched on her tiptoes, appearing almost weightless and suspended in space while simultaneously implying the arduous effort in remaining motionless in that pose. Rapt on the white moth, she seems 'struck with hypnotic sleep' and petrified in a 'contemplative immobility', features that noticeably hark back to Gustave Moreau's statuesque Salomé who is supposedly dancing, also an image wrestling between the conflictory forces of flowing movement and terse stillness.<sup>xxiii</sup> Again, the notions of reverie and trance, and the ambiguity of liminal states between different realities such as intense physical effort paired with complete immobility, inner vision and exterior phenomena – notions dear to the *Zhuangzi* – are evoked here. Is the moth the girl's hallucination? Is she trying to shield the moth from the lamp or capture it? These questions are caught in this delicate instant when the ephemerality of life is accentuated as the moth flies into the fire, or just before the girl wakes up, like Zhuang Zhou, and sees her vision disperse.

If Balthus's paintings of dreaming and trance-struck girls were inscribed with poetry, as many Chinese paintings typically are, poetic lines about the wandering spirit from the *Zhuangzi* would indeed be very suitable. Given that Balthus illustrated the *Zhuangzi* and *Wuthering Heights*, showing his tendency to associate images with literary texts, it is not far-fetched to think that Balthus would have certain texts in mind when

painting, thus making his visual works poetically evocative. This does not necessarily mean Balthus's pictures illustrate the Chinese poetic writings that took precedence over the image in Balthus's mind at the time of painting – this facile interpretation of the imagic medium 'expressed in the terms of the [textual] other' and vice versa is precisely something that should be called into question, as Clunas proposes.<sup>xxiv</sup> Instead, we may understand that Balthus's figure paintings subtly allude to, rather than express the *Zhuangzi's* ideas and aesthetics.

If we turn to Balthus's landscape paintings, however, we find more explicit references to Chinese poetic imagery and painting, supported by Balthus's open acknowledgement of deriving inspiration from Chinese painting. Balthus professed that at fourteen, he discovered a book on Chinese Song dynasty (960-1279) landscape paintings and found them a 'révélation': 'Une reconnaissance que là était bien mon lieu et qu'il n'y avait aucune rupture entre les Alpes devant mes yeux et ces pics vertigineux de la Chine' ('A recognition that my place was indeed there and that absolutely no discontinuity existed between the Alps before my eyes and these vertiginous pictures from China').<sup>xxv</sup> Incidentally, Balthus's response to the Song mountainscapes is the ideal response that the Song painter Guo Xi wanted landscape painting to evoke: that the viewer should 'feel as if he were really in the place depicted'.<sup>xxvi</sup> For Balthus, there was a natural resonance between the Chinese landscapes and his aesthetic vision of the mountains he actually saw. No wonder that besides learning extensively about traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, as noted by Balthus's biographers Rewald, Vircondelet, and the critic Xiaozhu Xing, Balthus also tried to integrate them in the development of his own style. In particular, he had 'a marked preference' for Chinese literati paintings,<sup>xxvii</sup> e.g. masters such as Fan Kuan (960–1030), Huang Gongwang (1269–1354), and Shi Tao (1642–1707), whose treatise on painting Balthus read in the French translation by Pierre Ryckmans: *Les Propos sur la peinture du moine Citrouille-Amère* (1966). Certain aesthetic ideas and

expressions of these Chinese masters were recreated in Balthus's own works, albeit in the medium of oil. In some instances, Balthus consciously imitated a 'Chinese' style, as in his experimentation with ink landscape, in his *Paysage de Montecalvello* (1979) (figure 4),<sup>xxviii</sup> and particularly his *Gottéron* (1943) (figure 5). *Montecalvello* conveys a feeling of vastness and deep tranquillity. And just as Chinese mountain-water paintings typically depict, the human figures in the picture are tiny and immersed in the wider cosmos. As Xing comments, there is an 'airy lightness of the landscape',<sup>xxix</sup> which is an unusual effect for the heavy medium of oil paint. The free movement and liquid-like lines of Chinese ink paintings seem to reappear in the ethereal clouds and blurred, sinuous mountain contours in Balthus's picture. [insert figures 4, 5, and 6 here]

*Le Gottéron*, which depicts a Swiss mountain near where Balthus lived, deserves closer examination since it is a painting explicitly recreated after Fan Kuan. As Balthus professes: 'I have a particular love for Fan Kuan. His landscape unfolds in a magnificent way. I would have liked to make a copy of this painting by Fan Kuan, but in oils of course.'<sup>xxx</sup> The painting which Balthus refers to is Fan's famous *Travellers among Mountains and Streams* (c. 1000) (figure 6). Besides the similar pictorial content – monumental mountains, expressive strokes of brush rendering the dramatic rise of rocks, and the insignificance of the human figures travelling on the mountain paths (two cattle-herds in Fan's case, and a peasant carrying wood in Balthus's) – the important shared feature of both paintings is their segmented pictorial composition. Three layers of receding distances are depicted in the bottom foreground, middle cliff façades, and distant mountain peaks. Balthus very likely was aware of Guo Xi's theory about 'three distances' (*sanyuan*) in composing a landscape painting, which is exemplified in Fan's painting.<sup>xxxi</sup> In Guo's view, a landscape 'suitable for gazing upon is not as successful as one in which one may travel or dwell'.<sup>xxxii</sup> This roaming (*you* as in *youxin*) experience of the viewer within the landscape can be enhanced by painting mountains in layered perspectives:

Mountains can be seen from three distances; 'high distance' (*gaoyuan*) is the view to the top of the mountain seen from below; 'deep distance' (*shenyuan*) is the view that extends beyond the mountain range; 'level distance' (*pingyuan*) is the view that spreads from one nearby mountain to a more distant one. 'High distance' produces an effect of lofty grandeur, 'deep distance' of successive layers, and 'level distance' of hazy recession.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Unlike the one-point perspective dominant in European painting since the Renaissance, this tripartite spatial organisation in Fan's *Travellers* has the visual effect of changing between multiple perspectives, thus making the viewer aware of different views and the freedom of the gaze to wander around instead of being directed. In comparison, Balthus's *Gottéron* also has a three-layer depiction, although with more perspectival unity. One general viewpoint is suggested, that of the viewer gazing towards the mountain top from below. But we also notice other perspectives: the swamp-like pond is seen top-down, from a slanting aerial angle; whereas starting from the tiny man carrying wood to the large tree on the extreme right, the direction of the gaze seems to emanate from the right-hand side of the painting, so that we see the tilted backs of the man and tree. *Le Gottéron* therefore also invites the viewer to assume multiple and fragmented viewpoints, echoing Fan's painting in an important way. In this way, *Le Gottéron* connects to the concept of spiritual roaming through evoking the viewer's wandering gaze and her imagined experience of travelling inside the depicted landscape, subtly expressing Balthus's favourite motif of dream or inner vision again, except that this time it is not portrayed through human figures.

Nevertheless, despite being a subtle recreation of Fan's *Travellers*, *le Gottéron* is unmistakably a re-invention in Balthus's own terms rather than an imitation of Chinese painting. At first sight, *le Gottéron* may not even strike one as Chinese or Oriental in style. Unlike Fan's painting, it is extremely sombre in palette and has dark Gothic overtones

reminiscent of Romanticist visions of nature. The rocks' contours are hard and angular rather than soft and wavy, conveying an expressionist style that introduces the presence of a sublime and overwhelming nature that emanates a feeling of danger and threat. Fan's *Travellers*, however, has a much more lyrical and peaceful mood. Humans, animals, trees and stones are harmoniously integrated in the larger cosmos, nature is accommodating rather than intimidating.

Rather than stereotypical iconography of chinoiserie that blatantly and superficially plucks cultural symbols from their contexts, as found in colonial expositions and much Orientalist art such as Boucher's Chinese paintings at the Salon du Louvre 1742 or Gérôme's North-African paintings, Balthus's artworks hardly provide any obvious pictorial tropes that identify with Chinese culture. Instead, Balthus's references to Chinese painting and literature are extremely subtle (especially in his dreaming girls) and reworked to a great degree. Balthus's recreative imitation of Chinese art enabled him to feel an aesthetic intimacy with Chinese masters, which then helped him bring new qualities and perspectives to his paintings which would otherwise have been impossible. We could say that Balthus's paintings of dreaming adolescents and mountainscapes reinvent his Chinese sources in new forms and contexts.

### **Michaux: Anti-Orientalism and Chinese aesthetics as self-transformation**

While Balthus is exemplary in demonstrating a non-Orientalist but subtly sinophilic approach to Chinese aesthetics in twentieth-century painting, Michaux's engagement with Chinese aesthetic forms and ideas offers a both similar and contrasting case. Similar in that Michaux's references to Chinese culture in his visual art also appear in a non-Orientalist way without any stereotypical chinoiserie, contrasting in that Michaux, unlike Balthus, verbally and explicitly criticised the exoticisation of China and theoretically demonstrated through his writings that his avoidance of chinoiserie was a conscious



choice.

Michaux was loosely connected with surrealism and worked in Paris for the large part of his creative career. He was one of the prominent sinophiles in the twentieth century, not only travelling to China, but also learning about Chinese culture through extensive reading, familiarization with Chinese painting and calligraphy, and dialogues with Chinese artists (notably Zhao Wuji). As already mentioned, the two prominent aspects of twentieth-century French interest in Chinese aesthetics were firstly, its belief that Chinese aesthetics led to new ways of seeing; secondly, a critical awareness of the need to challenge conventional Orientalist representation. Michaux is paradigmatic in both these aspects because his works – spanning both paintings and literary writings – engaged in new attempts to conceptualise poetry and its image-word relation, and to resist the Orientalist tradition by trying to de-exoticise China. China was like a recurrent dream that found repeated expression in Michaux's critical reflections upon Orientalist travelogues, his fake ideographs that mimic Chinese characters, his calligraphic ink paintings, his prose-poetry that explicitly draws upon classical Chinese literature and Daoist notions of *qi*, or the cosmic breath that animates painting and literary composition. These aspects of Michaux's Chinese inspirations will be examined more closely in the following, first by reading Michaux's critical endeavour to break away from the Euro-centric exoticism of the Orientalist tradition in his *Un Barbare en Asie* (1933); then by considering Michaux's paintings, which complement his writings and continue Michaux's sinophilic activities, but in non-Orientalist ways.

Michaux self-consciously did not identify with the French Orientalist tradition – especially that of Pierre Loti and Paul Claudel – nor wanted to perpetuate it.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Instead, he was extremely critical of Orientalists' colonial mentality, their tourist appropriation of oriental cultures and presumption of European cultural superiority, as well as their constructions of racist stereotypes. In line with more sophisticated orientophiles such as

Segalen, Léon Werth and Saint-John Perse who criticised the inherent imperialism of exoticism, Michaux also contributed to the subversion of the exoticist discourse that revealed the colonial fascination with the Other. Even as he undertook the typical activities of Orientalists – embarking on a 'Grand Tour en Orient' in 1931 and writing a travelogue about it, which became his widely read *Un Barbare en asie* – Michaux did them in a self-consciously subversive spirit. Already during his trip to Ecuador in 1927, which took place earlier than his Oriental travels, Michaux expressed the disenchantment with exoticism and wrote that he experienced South-America as a 'terre [...] rincée de son exotisme' ('land [...] rinsed of its exoticism').<sup>xxxv</sup> Like Lévi-Strauss, who professed to hate all travels despite travelling to Amazonia, Michaux travelled in the spirit of 'voyager contre' ('travel against').<sup>xxxvi</sup> – Against cheap stereotypes, of course, but more importantly, against himself and the institution of European culture. *Un Barbare* – partly fiction, partly travel diary – is both a deep self-reflection upon and reaction against colonialism and Eurocentrism. As the title explicitly shows, the 'barbare' refers to Michaux himself, the European man, who feels puzzled and humbled by the cultural richness and refinement of the East, especially China and India. This is manifest from the fact that Michaux constantly compares the Indian and Far-Eastern cultures with Europe, and always to the detriment of the latter, thus reversing the typical assumptions about European superiority in Orientalist discourse:

Les philosophies occidentales font perdre les cheveux, écourtent la vie.

La philosophie orientale fait croître les cheveux et prolonge la vie. [...]

En Europe, tout finit en tragédie. Il n'y a jamais eu attrait pour la sagesse, en Europe.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Western philosophies make you lose your hair and curtails life. Oriental philosophy grows your hair and prolongs life. [...]

In Europe, everything ends in tragedy. There has never been any inclination for wisdom, in Europe.

In contrast to the holistic and life-nurturing wisdom of the Orient, Michaux considers European thought as torn between dichotomies, having no place for wisdom and unsalutary. Before the Hindu's holistic religious experience and the exquisite subtlety of Chinese literature and theatre, Michaux feels disgusted by Europeans and depicts them as crude, violent, and rapacious: 'excessifs, véritables groins de sangliers' ('excessives, real pig snouts').<sup>xxxviii</sup> Even the pornographic images Michaux encounters in China and Japan seem cleansed of the 'vulgar lewdness' in European erotic art: 'La moitié des toiles du Luxembourg me paraissent à moi sales, tandis que leurs [i.e. the Chinese and Japanese] cartes obscènes me paraissaient étonnamment fines et incapables de ravages intérieurs' ('Half of the paintings of Luxembourg seemed dirty to me, whereas the [Chinese and Japanese] obscene pictures seemed astonishingly refined and devoid of internal conflicts').<sup>xxxix</sup> Moreover, Michaux also tries to see the European from the eyes of the Other, reversing the direction of the gaze and power. He cites Indian and Chinese perceptions of European peoples as crude and incapable of cultural refinement:

Un éminent sanscritiste hindou fut prié par un des Européens [...] de traduire pour le public européen tel et tel texte de chansons: '*Est-ce qu'on jette des perles au-devant des pourceaux?*' telle fut la réponse. [...]

Les chinois disent que la musique européenne est monotone. 'Ce ne sont que des marches', disent-ils.<sup>xl</sup>

A renowned Hindu sanskritist was begged by a European man [...] to translate for the European public such and such text of hymns, and got the reply: '*Would you throw pearls before swine?*' [...]

The Chinese say that European music is monotonous: 'That's just some sort

of parade music'.

Through this comparison, Michaux professes a self-disgust and acknowledges the cultural inferiority of Europe instead. This is a fully self-conscious ironic reversal of French exoticist writings that always end up affirming the Other's primitiveness and the progressive civilisation of the European self. At this point, however, we may criticise Michaux. Despite his explicit anti-Eurocentrism, he often draws a reductive and naïvely romanticised scheme of contrasts between East and West, obvious in the above-cited examples where 'sagesse', the cultivation of life, and refinement are seen as typically Eastern traits as opposed to the violence, crudeness and instrumental rationality of Europe. Michaux's orientophilia seems to be a reverse orientalism, where everything that the Self lacks is found in the Other, and then idealised. Nevertheless, Michaux is too sophisticated to not realise this problem himself, for as *Un Barbare* progresses he writes in an increasingly self-parodic way. For example, after observing numerous characteristics of Oriental peoples and pretending to offer, as a typical Romanticist does, a view of cultures as entities with souls or a particular *Geist*, Michaux starts ironically debunking Oriental stereotypes. He notes that Chinese women are not yellow-skinned at all: 'pas jaune, la Chinoise, mais chlorotique, pâle, lunaire' ('the Chinese woman is not yellow but anaemically green, pale, and moon-like').<sup>xli</sup> Towards the end of the book and his travels, he also expresses a self-undermining scepticism about seeking the supposed 'mentalities' of different peoples or any homogeneous cultural entity, thus fending off any accusation of him straightforwardly endorsing cultural essentialism:

Après avoir parlé de la mentalité de certains peuples, on se demande vraiment si ça en valait la peine, si on n'aurait pas mieux occupé son temps d'une autre façon. [...]

Il y a eu partout tellement d'invasions de races diverses, Huns, Tartares, Mongols, Normands, etc., et tant d'afflux de religions diverses, néolithique,

totémique, solaire, animiste, sumérienne, assyrienne, druidique, romaine, islamique, bouddhique, nestorienne, chrétienne, etc., que personne n'est pur, que chacun est un indicible, un indébrouillable mélange.xlii

After having talked about the mentality of certain peoples, you ask yourself if it is really worth the pain, if it would have been better using your time to do something else. [...]

Everywhere there have been so many invasions of diverse races, the Huns, Tartars, Mongols, Normans, etc., and so much influx of diverse religions, neolithic, totemic, sun-worshipping, animist, Sumerian, Assyrian, Druid, Roman, Islamic, Buddhist, Nestorian, Christian, etc., that nobody is pure, that everyone is an unspeakable, unravellable mixture.

Finally, *Un Barbare* finishes as an anti-travelogue and Michaux seems thoroughly fed up with seeking the Self in the Other or using the Other to solve one's own problems, citing the Buddha about retreating into solitary contemplation:

'N'allez en quête de refuge qu'auprès de vous-même.' [...]

'Tenez-vous bien dans votre île à vous.'

'COLLÉS À LA CONTEMPLATION.'xlili

'Don't seek refuge anywhere other than near yourself.' [...]

'Keep to yourselves within your individual island.'

'*GLUED TO CONTEMPLATION.*'

This distrust in engaging with the Other reflects Michaux's acute awareness of the difficult position from which he is writing, which is voiced clearly in his posthumous preface in 1967 to *Un Barbare*, where he refers to the book as 'ce livre qui [...] me gene et me heurte, me fait honte' ('this book that [...] embarrasses, hurts me, and makes me

ashamed').<sup>xliv</sup> Michaux knows that he is inevitably complicit to a certain extent with the colonialist, since he is writing as a European man in the context of travelling in these Asian countries that have been heavily impacted by European colonialism or westernisation. Despite his healthy scepticism and anti-Eurocentrism, he is still caught by pitfalls of cultural misunderstandings and simplifications that reflect the exoticist desire of seeing the Orient as spiritual therapy. Looking back on his book, Michaux confesses in humility to his skewed perceptions of these Asian cultures and his wish to maintain the difference between them and Europe (Orientalism, as is well noted, has always insisted on how different the Orient is from the West): 'De ma naïveté, de mon ignorance, de mon illusion de démystifier, il [ce livre] date' ('[This book] dates from my naïvety, my ignorance, and my illusion of demystifying').<sup>xlv</sup> By the end of the preface, Michaux professes to have remained a 'barbare', thus honestly facing his failure to grasp the reality of these Eastern cultures he admires so much: 'Barbare on fut, barbare on doit rester' ('Barbarian you were, barbarian you shall remain').<sup>xlvi</sup> But it is precisely this admittance of failure that constitutes an ethical gesture that differentiates Michaux from the unreflecting exoticist who exploits Oriental imagery and cultural symbols. As Maulpoix observes, it is not 'un Orient de pacotille' ('an Orient of trinkets') that Michaux wants to relate to and represent, but 'une vue plus clairvoyante et peut-être plus complète de la condition humaine' ('a more discerning and maybe more encompassing view of the human condition').<sup>xlvii</sup> Perhaps more than anything, Michaux wanted to see oriental cultures and peoples from the viewpoint of a commonly-shared humanity, but the Orientalist tradition was a framework from which he had to wrest away, and in that process he also partially perpetuated it.

Nevertheless, although Michaux apologises for his naïve opinions, he asserts unambiguously his sinophilia and suggests that there is nothing wrong with engaging with the Other, even if the project will always fail, at least partially. Here Michaux poses a difficult question to himself: being critically aware of Orientalist superficiality and tourist

consumerism, how could he love China without appropriating it or falling for simplistic myths? Having been fed much chinoiserie imagery through the popular 'Grandes expositions' that were pervaded by colonial and imperialist representation and through early translations of Chinese literature that also exploited the exotic novelty and 'bizarreness' of non-European literature as a marketing strategy, could Michaux still dream of China as an aesthetic and spiritual alternative without realising that this dream itself reflected the problem of his self-hatred rather than genuine engagement with Chinese culture? The problems that Michaux discovers by his endeavour to subvert Orientalism are very serious, but Michaux clearly does not think that the answer is to withdraw from engaging with China altogether. Instead, Michaux responds by serious long-term engagement with Chinese aesthetic ideas in his creative activities, especially his ink paintings, which in a non-linguistic way refashions Michaux's Chinese inspirations into forms that subtly reference their sources, as Balthus's pictures do. I will now turn to consider Michaux's artistic practice in more detail.

To start with, like Balthus, Michaux's inspiration for his artworks was significantly nourished by his reading of ancient Chinese literature via translations and sinological studies. Like Balthus, again, Michaux was particularly attracted to Daoist literature and thought, and greatly admired the three canonical Daoist texts: the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi*. He praised these texts for their striking but 'lapidary' style that provokes much thought: 'Lao-tseu, Chuang-tsu, dans leur philosophie, [...] ont ce style extraordinaire. Ce style où l'on épargne les mots' ('Laozi, Zhuangzi, in their philosophy, [...] have this extraordinary style. This style that uses words sparingly').<sup>xlviii</sup> But what particularly draws Michaux to Daoist literature is certain aesthetic ideas and qualities that he finds in them: firstly, weakness instead of strength. – For weakness is yielding and gentle like water, without dichotomist antagonisms, reflecting an attitude of non-interference, or 'laissez-faire';<sup>xlix</sup> secondly, liquid and free movement, which characterises

a carefree spirit roaming in dreamlike space, well illustrated by the *Zhuangzi*'s notion of *youxin* as discussed above; thirdly, emphasis on the preserving the body and its vitality, which strikes an important cord in Michaux's physical and artistic dispositions. As Parish and Mihailovich-Dickman have observed, artistic activities have great therapeutic significance for Michaux;<sup>l</sup> being plagued by ill health for much of his life, Michaux also developed an obsession about affirming and rediscovering his corporeality: 'mon intégrité récupérée (celle de mon corps, c'est-à-dire mon bien, mon intégrité *originelle*)' ('my recovered integrity (of my body, which is my wealth, my *original* integrity'); 'Être préservé, [...] mon espace vital' ('To be preserved, [...] my vital space').<sup>li</sup> The emphasis on bodily perfection in Daoist texts therefore naturally attracted Michaux and further led him to connect bodily practice with artistic practice. Finally, Michaux sees in Daoist thought a *coincidentia oppositorum*, an indifferentiated experience well illustrated by a story which Michaux cites from the *Liezi*, about a Daoist sage passing unharmed through water and fire without any awareness of doing so;<sup>lii</sup> or indifferentiated as in the state of calm ecstasy, summarised in Michaux's remarkable phrase 'paix dans les brisements' ('peace in the breaking flood').<sup>liii</sup>

It is important to understand that these aesthetic ideas Michaux draws from Daoist literature are his creative interpretations rather than historically and textually-grounded views. What Michaux valued most in Daoist stories about shamans passing through fire and riding the wind or mythic animals travelling to the limits of the world was precisely their power to spark the reader's mind off into flights of imagination.<sup>liv</sup> These ideas therefore became the conceptual basis for many of Michaux's paintings and poems, and were very consciously transformed like raw materials and translated into concrete visual and linguistic forms by Michaux. Take Michaux's artworks for instance, they consist of mainly Chinese ink paintings and calligraphic lithographs of Chinese-inspired ideographs Michaux invented himself, and are usually published side-by-side with his poems. These



poems, as well as Michaux's prose writings, self-reflexively complement or comment on the visual works and the processes of their creation. A good example is *Par des traits* (1984), where a few pieces of prose-poetry are interspersed between a large number of ink paintings. [insert figure 7 here] As we see in figure 7, the pictorial space is overflowed by fluid ink marks and splotches, with a following poem about free-moving lines being 'notre thérapie, notre hygiène' ('our therapy and our health').<sup>lv</sup> These lines – of the poem and the paintings – weave together unobstructed movements, illustrating painting as bodily trace, and artistic creation as a restorative practice. They are energy paintings, as Roelens and Hattendorf have observed, through which Michaux materialises feelings, moods, and the affective 'aura'.<sup>lvi</sup> Painting then seems to be emanations from Michaux's body and spirit, echoing the Chinese cosmological notion of *qi*, the pan-cosmic breath-energy that animates everything. This corresponds well to the idea in Chinese painting, notably articulated during the Six Dynasties (220-589), of capturing the *qi* and *shen* ('spirit', 'daimonic force') of things instead of their mere outwardly appearance.<sup>lvii</sup>

Michaux's painterly use of the line also expresses the subtlety and ethereal weakness he finds in Chinese theatre and Daoist thought. Indeed, Michaux proposes a poetics of the line. In contrast to European oil painting that is heavy in medium and colour, defined by brushstrokes that have noticeable width and fill up pictorial space, Michaux prefers to compose his paintings from the insubstantial single line. This is a significant aesthetic choice because in Western art history, as is emphasised repeatedly from Brunelleschi, Dürer, through Winckelmann to Malevich, there has been nothing more delineative and controlling than the line. It is the line that constitutes fundamental geometrical shapes, defines different forms, separates space into distinct spheres, and measures perspective and proportion. Yet it is precisely through the line that Michaux goes against form and perspective, and expresses, indeed, embodies the formlessness of metamorphosis and movement. For Michaux, the line characterises fragility, lightness, and a minimalist

palette; even with multiple lines, pictorial space is not filled but fragmented into airy and indefinite fields. This is manifest in Michaux's paintings in *Emergences-Résurgences* (1972), where Michaux describes an instance of his line-drawing:

Une ligne plutôt que des lignes. Ainsi je commence, me laissant mener par une, une seule, [...] Comme moi la ligne cherche sans savoir ce qu'elle cherche, [...] ligne d'aveugle investigation.lviii

One line instead of many lines. Thus I begin, letting myself be led by a single line, only one, [...] Like myself the line seeks without knowing what she seeks, [...] a line of blind exploration.

Michaux liberates the line from its rationalist functions of defining form and providing measurement. The line becomes 'non enlaçante', 'sans rien cerner, jamais cernée' ('non-encircling,' 'delineating nothing, and never delineated').lix In his poem 'Aventures de lignes' (1954), dedicated to Paul Klee, Michaux writes:

Les allusives, celles qui exposent une métaphysique, [...] lignes signes, tracé de la poésie, rendant le plus lourd léger. [...]

Une ligne rencontre une ligne. Une ligne évite une ligne. Aventures de lignes.

Une ligne pour le plaisir d'être ligne, d'aller, ligne.

Une ligne rêve. On n'avait jusque-là jamais laissé rêver une ligne.lx

Those allusive things that reveal a certain metaphysics, [...] lines that are signs, traced from poetry, rendering the heaviest lightweight. [...]

A line encounters a line. A line avoids a line. Adventure of lines.

A line for the pleasure of being a line, of proceeding, line.

A line dreams. A line has never yet been allowed to dream.

Michaux breaks away from conventional understanding by asserting that a line can be dreamy, emotional, and roam pictorial space in self-pleasure. This spontaneous and random movement echoes the carefree wandering movement (*you*) typically found in Daoist texts. For example, the huge bird Peng in the *Zhuangzi* (1.1) that transforms from a leviathan fish and roams the skies for thousands of miles; or King Zhou Mu in the *Liezi* (3.1) who travels, oblivious of his sovereign duties, to an imaginary palace built over the clouds. These activities resemble foam erratically drifting on water, where the drifting subject is not orientated towards any specific goal but takes pleasure purely from the drifting process itself. It is the movement of 'floating idly' in water (*Zhuangzi* 1.6); and in pictorial space it is analogous to the roaming gaze that Chinese Song landscapes invite its viewer to have. Like the lines in Balthus's *Gottéron* that zig-zag through the dramatic cliffs, the Michauldian line 'dreams' and encounters unexpected turns and 'adventures', engaging with an act of drifting, as if tracing out the invisible meanderings of the spirit in reverie.

Michaux's adoption of the line as his predominant artistic expression is also crucial for his ideographic paintings. In them, Michaux traces ideographs that resemble Chinese characters but which do not have any linguistic meaning (see figure 8). These invented ideographs take inspiration from Chinese calligraphy and make subtle comments on the Chinese language. Michaux is not naïve like Pound and Fenollosa, who claimed that Chinese characters are 'vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature'.<sup>lxi</sup> Nor did Michaux believe Claudel's stunning simplism that one could understand Chinese and Japanese without learning them because they imitated the shape of concrete natural objects.<sup>lxii</sup> Against these Orientalist and superficial views of the Chinese language, instead, Michaux understood that Chinese characters did not imitate the simple form of concrete objects and are extremely complex:

Ce qu'il n'y a pas cinq caractères sur les vingt mille qu'on puisse deviner au premier coup d'oeil.

L'ancienne écriture chinoise [...] dégagée de l'imitation, elle est devenue toute cérébrale, maigre, *inveloppante*.lxiii

There are not even five in the 20,000 characters that one could guess at first sight.

Ancient Chinese writing [...] once freed from imitation, became completely cerebral, insubstantial, and *non-encompassing*.

[insert figure 8 here]

Michaux does not see Chinese as representative of a more primitive, original, natural linguistic state than heavily inflectional Indo-European languages such as Greek and Sanskrit. Rather, Chinese represented a super-cultivated and evolved state with a sophisticated system of signs that demanded arduous learning. Against the grain of Fenollosa and Claudel's naturalist view of Chinese characters, Michaux's ideographic inventions (e.g. figure 8) deceptively mimic Chinese characters and are completely unreadable, having no referentiality to any recognisable object in reality. This could be Michaux's way of highlighting the non-mimeticness of Chinese writing. Although one might argue that there are some anthropomorphic aspects in Michaux's ideographs, this anthropomorphism is a deceptive one because these forms hark back to Michaux's 'homme-insecte', in Grossman's words, the subhuman creature that carries kafkaesque connotations of monstrous change and dissemblance.lxiv Instead of mimetic referentiality, Michaux relates his ideographs to something much deeper than the surface similarity of their shape to the human body, which is the intermediality between corporeal movement and the written sign. Chinese poetry and calligraphy, along with the pictorial quality of Chinese characters, offered excellent springboards for creative experimentation with

intersections of plastic and literary media. The aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy is crucially related to the calligrapher's *shen* ('spirit', 'daimonic force') and cosmic flow of *qi*, as the ancient Chinese art critic Xie He (479-502) expounded.<sup>lxv</sup> Calligraphy is therefore a reflection of the energy flows that animate the calligrapher's body, and is a substantial part of his 'spirit and bones' (*fenggu*). Michaux relates to these calligraphic notions in his ideographs, which combine the tracing of his bodily movement through the inkbrush across pictorial space, the resulting painting being of a record of his body and its temporality. He further comments on his own practice by explicitly referring to his Chinese inspiration:

Calligraphie – art du temps, expression du trajet; [...]

Être calligraphe, comme on est paysagiste. [...]

Ne plus imiter la nature. La signifier. Par des traits, des élans. [...]

Aller vite, vite par brusques traits glissant sans résistance sur le papier,  
*permettant une autre façon d'être chinois.*<sup>lxvi</sup>

Calligraphy – the art of time, expression of the trajectory; [...]

To be a calligrapher, just as one is a landscape artist. [...]

No longer imitate nature. Signify it. By lines, by impulses. [...]

Going swiftly, swiftly through abrupt lines sliding without resistance on  
paper, *making possible another way of being Chinese.*)

Michaux's ideograms thus collapse the categories of linguistic sign and picture, abstracting the human body into rhythmic notations that compose a cosmic landscape. Indeed, these ideograms are a self-painting and 'self-writing' akin to 'écriture automatique',<sup>lxvii</sup> not as a surrealist expression of unconscious thought but as free physical movement, a movement of Daoist drift that is a way of loving and 'being Chinese' for Michaux. The emotional and

corporeal energy they embody also makes them calligraphic iconotexts, or *écritures-peintures*, recalling the inseparable pair of painting and poetry in Chinese aesthetic theory. Michaux's *écritures-peintures* thus become 'landscapes' that show the mapping of an emotional and physical geography and a field of vision resonating with vital energy. As Michaux says with explicit reference to Bergson: '*Art de l'élan*. Ni l'amour n'est primordial, ni la haine, mais l'élan. L'élan est primordial, qui est à la fois appétit, lutte, désir' ('Art of the vital impetus. Neither love nor hate is primordial, but the vital impetus. It is primordial, which is simultaneously appetite, struggle, and desire').lxviii

To summarise, Michaux's Chinese-inspired ink paintings, like Balthus's subtle references to the *Zhuangzi* and Chinese landscapes, do not latch onto anything stereotypically Chinese such as easily recognisable labels or icons usually associated with China, as found in chinoiserie art and decoration. Bréchon says that 'Michaux était déjà chinois avant de partir [en Chine]' ('Michaux was already Chinese even before going [to China]')lxix – which suggests Michaux's 'Chinese' aesthetics is precisely something detached to cultural specificity or a fixed essence of China. Rather, Michaux's 'Chineseness' is a disposition, something that changes and evolves but not to identify with. This is affirmed by Michaux's refusal to exploit or perpetuate essentialist views about what forms should Chinese painting and aesthetics have. Instead, having explored certain ways of understanding movement and pictorial space in Chinese painting and calligraphy, and the Daoist idea of carefree roaming and drifting (*you*) as found in *the Zhuangzi* and submerged in Balthus's mountainscapes, Michaux enables artistic expression to flow from his brush of its own accord. In this way, Michaux lets Chinese aesthetic thought transform him on a much deeper level. As he answers his self-imposed question in *Un Barbare* 'Est-ce que la Chine m'a changé?' ('Has China changed me?')lxx: 'l'Asie continue son

mouvement, sourd et secret en moi' ('Asia continues its silent and secret movement in me').lxxi

Michaux thus shows that there are different ways of artistic appropriation in regard to Chinese calligraphy and aesthetic ideas, and not every way is necessarily an exoticising cultural appropriation. Despite Michaux's partial failure to grasp the reality of the Chinese Other, in his travelogues and experiences of China and his non-historicist understanding of Chinese literature, Michaux shows how he is learning how to love the Other by developing his sinophilia as a way of self-discovery, transformation, and artistic cultivation. China is not a cultural stereotype or commodity that works as an identity label, it precisely works against the notion of fixed identity for Michaux, for it is a process of change. Although China remained like a distant dream for Michaux, it was not because Michaux was an exoticist who confined China to an eternal cultural Other, but because he wanted to keep a distance, one that was both ethical and imaginative. It is this distance that allows a space where dreams can continue to be dreams rather than become reality, so that Michaux could treat China as dream material – malleable, imaginative, never fully revealed.

### **Conclusion: Balthus and Michaux in comparison and the question of 'Chinese aesthetics'**

In sum, that Chinese art and literature were important inspirational sources for Balthus and Michaux should be duly recognised, but not understood as as yet another Orientalist case of chinoiserie masquerade. Their Chinese-inspired works do not proffer more exoticist tropes for a Western audience to consume, but provides us with some important insights. First, Balthus and Michaux recreate elements of Chinese visual arts and aesthetic ideas in the context of their own practices and stylistic concerns, resulting in works that are distinctly Balthusian and Michauldian rather than recognisably 'Chinese' or Oriental. This

is demonstrated by the very understated references to Chinese literature and landscape painting in Balthus, and by the fact that Michaux's ideographic paintings are acknowledged inventions. This rejection of facile cultural stereotypes invites us to rethink assumptions about what Chinese aesthetics means and the way Balthus and Michaux engaged with it. I argued that understanding Balthus and Michaux by relating them to the Chinese aesthetic tradition does not mean that their works are identifiably 'Chinese' (in fact they are precisely unidentifiably so) or embody any Chinese 'spirit', but that they took certain Chinese visual forms and aesthetic notions as inspirational indicators that opened up new directions in their own practices and helped them find their own artistic styles. This shows that aesthetic forms are precisely revitalised by radical changes and thrive on reinvention rather than rely on the repetition of clichéd forms. This metamorphosis of aesthetic forms and approach in Balthus and Michaux thus raises a bigger issue: the question about 'Chinese aesthetics' itself. The term already sets up the expectation that there is a set of stylistic traits and tropes that artworks, literature, and aesthetic thought originating from Chinese culture should have. But this generalisation is a way of cultural labelling that carries Orientalist undertones in its desire to recognise cultural stereotypes. We find terms such as 'British aesthetics', 'French aesthetics' or 'German aesthetics' rather awkward and slightly ridiculous, because it makes much more sense to discuss individual artists, writers, and specific groups and styles rather than bunch them all under their culture of provenance, as if there were an overall stylistic commonality or 'Frenchness' in all artworks produced throughout French history. But due to the Orientalist legacy of wishing to reduce non-European cultures to manageable categories with sets of tropes, the terms 'Chinese aesthetics', 'Japanese aesthetics', or 'Indian aesthetics' seem normal and are even widely used. This is a fallacy. Saussy says that 'by asking whether China has an *Iliad* or an *Agamemnon*, one tries to learn something from an identification, a process in which the nature of identification itself is not obviously at stake'.<sup>lxxii</sup> But the nature and



assumptions of such an identification *should be* at stake. Similarly, the notion of 'Chinese aesthetics' identifies an aesthetics through preconceptions arising from cultural labelling and stylistic uniformity. This understanding of Chinese aesthetics is revealed as greatly misleading by Balthus's and Michaux's Chinese-inspired but non-Orientalist artworks, for they affirm aesthetics and artistic creation as metamorphic processes that are not bound to cultural identity, stereotypes, or categorisation based upon cultural entities. If Chinese paintings and literature are expected to embody a set of recognisable and consistent aesthetic forms and concepts, then there is really no such thing as Chinese aesthetics. Instead, we should examine specific periods, artworks and texts, artists and poets in Chinese history, as well as their transhistorical and transnational changes via artistic reception, – as in Balthus's and Michaux's works, where China recurs as a distant but vivid

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- i See Andrew Brink, *Desire and Avoidance in Art* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); and Sabine Rewald 'Balthus's Thérèses', *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol.33 (1998): 305-14.
- ii Mary Magada-Ward 'The Virtues and Dangers of Connecting Art to Life', *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, New series, vol.25, no.1 (2011): 23. See Alan Woods 'Balthus', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, XIV:3, (1985): 187-204; James Thrall Soby 'Balthus', *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, vol.24, no.3 (1956): 1-36.
- iii Louis Renou in Raymond Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale*, (Paris: Payot, 1950), 6.
- iv Paul Gauguin, lettre à Daniel de Monfreid, octobre 1897, in *Lettres de Gauguin à Daniel de Monfreid, précédées d'un hommage de Victor Ségalen*, ed. Joly-Ségalen, (Paris: Georges Falaize, 1943), 248, letter 37.
- v André Breton, 'Les appels de l'Orient', in *Les Cahiers du Mois*, n.9-10 (1925): 250-51.
- vi All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
- vii René Etiemble, 'Le mythe taoïste en France au XXe siècle', *Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises*, n.13 (1961): 41-53.
- viii Balthus, in *Mémoires de Balthus*, ed. Alain Vircondelet (Monaco: Rocher, 2001), 33.
- ix Peter Schjeldahl, 'In the Head: Balthus and Magritte Reconsidered', *The Art World*, Oct 7 2013, accessed 9 Jan 2017 <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/10/07/in-the-head>.
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- xi Rilke cited in Soby 'Balthus', 3.
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- xiii See *Le Rêve I, La Chambre*, and *Nu endormi* in Rewald, *Balthus – catalogue* (New York: Met Museum, 1984).
- xiv James Elkins, 'On the impossibility of stories: the anti-narrative and non-narrative impulse in modern painting.' *Word & Image*, 7:4 (1991), 348-64.
- xv Vircondelet, *Mémoires*, 33.
- xvi Woods, 'Balthus', 190.
- xvii Ibid., 191. See Courbet's painting <http://parismuseescollections.paris.fr/fr/petit-palais/oeuvres/pierre-joseph-proudhon-et-ses-enfants-en-1853>, accessed 29 Mar 2017.
- xviii Reference to early Chinese texts marked by 'chapter.section'.
- xix Leo Steinberg, 'Picasso's Sleepwatchers', in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with twentieth-century art* by Leo Steinberg (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 105.
- xx Vircondelet, *Mémoires*, 57.
- xxi Jean Clair, *Balthus*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 374.
- xxii Vircondelet, *Mémoires*, 90.
- xxiii Victor Cherbulliez on Moreau's Salomé, 'Le salon de 1876', *Revue des deux mondes*, 1 juin 1876: 521.
- xxiv Craig Clunas, 'Reading Wen Zhengming: metaphor and Chinese painting', *Word & Image*, 25:1 (2012): 99.

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- xxv Vircondelet, *Mémoires*, 25.
- xxvi James Cahill, *Treasures of Asia: Chinese painting* (Cleveland: Skira and World Publishing Company, 1960), 35.
- xxvii Xing, 'The influence of Chinese painting in Balthus's landscapes' in Clair, *Balthus*, 90.
- xxviii See picture [http://www.fonds-balthus.com/medias/balthus/loeuvre/6/08 Paysage-de-Montecalvello.jpg](http://www.fonds-balthus.com/medias/balthus/loeuvre/6/08_Paysage-de-Montecalvello.jpg), accessed 29 Mar 2017.
- xxix Xing in Clair, *Balthus*, 89.
- xxx Balthus cited by Xing in Clair, *Balthus*, 90.
- xxxi Guo Xi speaks of the *shanshui* (mountain-water) painting, which not only denotes natural environments but also artificially cultivated surroundings such as pavilions, gardens, and cultivated land. Here I use the unsatisfactory equivalent of 'landscape' painting due to the essay's scope.
- xxxii Cited in Valérie Malender Ortiz, *Dreaming the Southern Song Landscape* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 79.
- xxxiii Ibid.
- xxxiv See Sartre on Michaux in *D'une Chine à l'autre* (Paris: Delpire, 1954).
- xxxv Henri Michaux, *Ecuador* (Gallimard, 1929), 35.
- xxxvi Michaux in Robert Bréchon, *Michaux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 13.
- xxxvii Michaux, *Un Barbare en asie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 26, 156.
- xxxviii Ibid., 149.
- xxxix Ibid., 211.
- xl Ibid., 79, 153.
- xli Ibid., 148.
- xlii Ibid., 210, 231.
- xliii Ibid., 233. This might be a pseudo-citation made up by Michaux, which increases the irony.
- xliv Ibid., 14.
- xlv Ibid., 13.
- xlvi Ibid., 14.
- xlvii Jean-Michel Maulpoix, *Par Quatre chemins* (Paris: Agora, 2013), 106.
- xlviii Michaux, *Un Barbare*, 185.
- xlx Ibid., 179.
- l Nina Parish, *Henri Michaux* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2007); Anne-Elisabeth Halpern and Véra Mihailovich-Dickmann, *Quelques Orient d'Henri Michaux* (Paris: Findakly, 1996).
- li Michaux, *Façons d'endormi, façons d'éveillé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 28, 63-55.
- lii Michaux, *Un Barbare*, 186.
- liii Michaux, *Paix dans les brisements* (Paris: Flinker, 1959).
- liv For these fantastic stories chapter 1 of the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 3 of the *Liezi*.
- lv Michaux, *Par des traits* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1984), unpaginated.
- lvi Nathalie Roelens, 'Ecrire le visage: Michaux, Blanchot, Klossowski, Genet', *Word & Image*, 15:4 (1999), 312; Richard L. Hattendorf, 'The visual pen: Instances of intemedia slippage in Henri Michaux's Meidosems', *Word & Image*, 9:2 (2012), 133-39.
- lvii See James Cahill on Xie He's *Six Laws of Painting* in Cahill, 'The Six Laws and how to read them', *Ars Orientalis*, 4 (1961): 372-81.
- lviii Michaux, *Emergences-Résurgences* (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1972), 11-12.
- lix Ibid., 12.
- lx Michaux, *Passages (1937-1963)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 177.
- lxi Ernest Fenollosa, 'The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry', <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/40852/40852-h/40852-h.htm>, accessed 20 Feb 2017.
- lxii See Paul Claudel, *L'Oiseau noir dans le soleil levant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1929).
- lxiii Michaux, *Un Barbare*, 159-60.
- lxiv Evelyne Grossman, *La Défiguration: Artaud – Michaux – Beckett* (Paris: Minuit, 2004), 111.
- lxv See Xie's 'Six Principles' in Osvald Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting* (Mineola/New York: Dover, 2005).
- lxvi Michaux, *Idéogrammes en Chine* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), unpaginated.
- lxvii Birgit Mersmann in *Meanings of Abstract Art*, ed. Paul Crowther and Isabel Wünsche (New York/London: Routledge, 2012), 208.
- lxviii Michaux, *Passages*, 185.
- lxix Robert Bréchon, *Henri Michaux* (Croissy-Beaubourg: Aden, 2005), 49.
- lxx Michaux, *Un Barbare*, 193.
- lxxi Ibid., 11.
- lxxii Haun Saussy, *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 18.