

A Study on the Translation and Introduction of J. M. G. Le Clézio in China

Jun Yu

Department of Foreign Languages, Zhongbei College of Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

Email: justineyj@126.com

How to cite this paper: Yu, J. (2019) A Study on the Translation and Introduction of J. M. G. Le Clézio in China. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 7, 290-299. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2019.712021>

Received: December 6, 2019

Accepted: December 20, 2019

Published: December 23, 2019

Copyright © 2019 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This paper analyzes the translation and introduction of J.M.G. Le Clézio in China, and finds that winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2008, which appeared to be a turning point for him, has played an important role in expanding his influence in China. Firstly, before winning the award, only a few of his works were translated into Chinese, after winning the award, Chinese publishing houses accelerated immediately the speed of translation and printing of his works; Secondly, before the award, in China, there were few research papers on his literary creation, and after the award, the number of academic studies about him began to rise immediately; Thirdly, in the eyes of Chinese readers, there exists a controversy of opinions about his works. Chinese general readers hardly know Le Clézio, but he is appreciated and highly recommended by Chinese translators and scholars. During the past ten years, with the active promotion of Chinese scholars, Le Clézio has maintained a certain influence in China. However, his influence mainly stayed in foreign literary research circles.

Keywords

Le Clézio, Translation, Introduction, Literature, Nobel Prize

1. Introduction

J.M.G. Le Clézio was born in Nice on April 13, 1940. He never stopped writing since the age of seven or eight. His first novel appeared in 1963 and won the Renaudo Prize. In 1980, he received the Paul Morand Grand Prize. In 2008, the Swedish Academy awarded him the Nobel Prize for Literature. In the eyes of French readers and critics, he is obviously one of the most famous contemporary writers in France. At the beginning of his literary career, Le Clézio was full of rebellious spirit. Being a soldier whose pen serves as his weapon, he denounces

the life of over-materialized Western cities, where anguish, unhappiness and pain suffocate people of the cities every day. His emotion of exclusion and rejection for Western modern civilization is expressed in a direct and strong way. But as he grows up and matures, with his journey all over the world, impressed by different civilizations, his writing style has gone from intense rebellion to gentle solicitude. Although there is an evolution in the form and content of his writing, his concern for the relations between man and nature, between man and society, between man and tradition, remains the permanent subject of his literary creation. The negative effects caused by the excessive expansion of urbanization and the problems of the consumer society, such as industrial pollution, cult of money, excessive consumerism, trust crisis, and even wars that have killed innumerable people, non-ruling civilization in a crisis of disappearance, etc., all these problems which disturb the contemporary human being, are marked in the spirit of Le Clézio since his first book. The only purpose of his writing is to appeal to man to re-examine the condition of human existence and the relations between man and nature, between man and society, between man and tradition, to beware of the crisis of the consumer society, to turn our gaze to nature, to the forgotten tradition and the non-ruling civilization, to find a way to get rid of the difficult situation that we find today.

Following the announcement of the Nobel Prize for Literature 2008, Le Clézio has received worldwide recognition. As a writer with a great reputation around the world, how is the situation of the translation and introduction of Le Clézio in China? His criticism of materialism and colonialism, his care for non-ruling or even forgotten civilizations and vulnerable groups in society, his aspiration for harmony and balance, do they attract Chinese readers? What are their opinions on his works? This paper will address these issues.

2. Translations and Academic Studies on the Works of Le Clézio in China

This section will show the situation of knowledge and understanding of Le Clézio and his works in China in two aspects: translations and academic studies.

2.1. Translations of Le Clézio's Works in China

Before the Nobel Prize for Literature of 2008 was announced, Le Clézio wasn't well known in China. Translator Yuan Xiaoyi said in her book *L'éternité des mots* that Le Clézio was the least known writer in China compared to other French writers of the 20th century. Perhaps to a certain extent, it's because of the lack of translation of his works in our country. Among his works translated into Chinese and introduced in China, there are only seven that were translated before the announcement of the 2008 Nobel Prize for Literature: *Désert* [1], translated in 1983; *Le Procès-verbal* [2], translated in 1992; *Mondo et autreshistoires* [3], translated in 1992; *La Guerre* [4], translated in 1994; *Étoile errante* [5], translated in 1998; *Poisson d'or* [6], translated in 2000; *Ourania* [7], translated in 2008. From *Désert* translated in June 1983 by QianLinsen and Xu Jun to *Ourania*

translated in January 2008 by Zi Yan, there is a gap of nearly thirty years between these seven Chinese translations, and each work is not reprinted after the first edition. Until October 2008, as soon as the Nobel Prize for literature was awarded to Le Clézio, Chinese publishing houses began to take an interest in this writer and his works. Translations made before 2008, like *Le Procès-verbal*, *La Guerre*, *Désert*, *Poisson d'or*, etc., began to be reprinted several times. At the same time, his other works were quickly translated and introduced in China. According to statistics from the famous book-selling website www.dangdang.com, in 2009, three works of Le Clézio were translated into Chinese: *La Ronde et autres faits divers* [8], *Raga. Approche du continent invisible* [9], *Ritournelle de la faim* [10]; in 2010, three more works were translated into Chinese: *Les Géants* [11], *Onitsha* [12], *Coeur brûle et autres romances* [13]; in 2012, the speed of translation continues to accelerate: *Le Rêve mexicain ou la pensée interrompue* [14], *Hasard* [15], *Le livre des fuites* [16], *Diego et Frida* [17], *L'Africain* [18]; in 2013, *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* [19], *Le Chercheur d'or* [20]; in 2014, *Voyage à Rodrigues* [21]; in 2016, *Ballaciner* [22], *Lullaby* [23], *Voyage au pays des arbres* [24]; in 2017, *Gens des nuages* [25]; in 2018, *Tempête* [26], *Révolutions* [27].

Compared to seven translations in nearly thirty years, the speed and number of translation and introduction of Le Clézio's works in China was astonishing after the announcement of the Nobel Prize for Literature. What a chain reaction!

From 2011 to 2017, Le Clézio has been invited many times in China to give speeches. The texts of his speeches were translated and edited by Xu Jun and had been published in December 2018. The book is entitled *La littérature et notre monde* [28]. There is also the latest book published in October 2019, *The dialogue between Wang Meng and J.M.G. Le Clézio* [29], which includes the content of the conversation between Chinese writer Wang Meng and Le Clézio on March 17, 2019. These books have received the attention of the literary research community, and have further expanded Le Clézio's influence among foreign literary researchers and enthusiasts in China.

2.2. Academic Studies on Le Clézio in China

Compared to studies in foreign countries, the study on Le Clézio in China is later in terms of time, and less numerous in terms of volume. According to the website CNKI, if we type "Le Clézio" as the keyword of research, we'll find that there's no article with the title including "Le Clézio" published on the academic periodicals in China between the year 1999 and 2007. Before the year 1999, there were some book reviews published by Yuan Xiaoyi, translator of several works of Le Clézio, or some short news announcing Le Clézio's new book on periodical *World Literature Recent Developments*. But all these articles serve as an introduction or an interpretation of the content and style of a certain work of Le Clézio, lacking complete and systematic studies on this writer's writing. As a famous writer in France, he remained unknown in China for a long time.

Until October 2008, after the announcement of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Le Clézio attracted the attention of the whole world, including this Eastern continent. In terms of publication, his works already translated into Chinese have been reprinted, and the new translations have been quickly published on the Chinese market. In academic terms, the number of studies on Le Clézio was growing, many articles have emerged in journals of all kinds. There are articles from the standpoint of ecological criticism, anti-materialism, etc., and journal articles that systematically study his literary career, his style and his thoughts in his writing. In 2008, 10 articles with the title including “Le Clézio” were published in Chinese academic journals, 9 of which were published after the announcement of Nobel Prize.

In 2009, only a year after the announcement of Nobel Prize, there're 23 articles studying Le Clézio published in academic journals, twice more than the number in 2008. On leading periodicals such as *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, *Foreign Literature Studies*, etc., there have been quite a few monographs on Le Clézio, including articles from well-known universities in China such as Nanjing University, Xiamen University, East China Normal University, etc. For example, *An overview of J.M.G. Le Clézio and his writing* [30] by Tan Chengchun, published in *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, is a basic research that makes an introduction to Le Clézio and his literary career, as well as his style of writing, to give a brief analysis of the controversies engendered among literary circles and readers in China and abroad. *On J.M.G. Le Clézio's writing* [31] written by Gao Fang and Xu Jun, published in *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, is an excellent article that examines and analyzes his thoughts in his writing on the basis of a thorough knowledge of his literary career. *Exploring the allegorical world of humanity in the works of J.M.G. Le Clézio* [32] by Yuan Xiaoyi, published in *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, is an article that attempts to underline that Le Clézio is an author from around the world, whose works have values on the whole of their internal integrity, themes and narrative style. *The literary creation and the humanistic ideals of Le Clézio. An interview with the winner of the 2008 Nobel Prize for Literature* [33] by Xu Jun, published in *Foreign Literature Studies*, is a personal interview between Professor Xu Jun and Le Clézio in Paris, shortly after the announcement of the 2008 Nobel Literature Prize. Le Clézio answered questions about his writing, and Xu Jun translated these answers into Chinese and introduced to Chinese readers for them to better understand this writer and his literary creation. The Nobel Prize has not only pushed sales of Chinese translations of his works in China, but has also led to an increase in academic studies due to heightened attention to him. This hot period cannot be compared with the situation of a cold reception in China before the year 2008. We have to admit that the Nobel Prize for literature has a kind of magic to attract the eyes of the world towards a certain writer.

After the boom of academic research in 2009, Chinese scholars have not neglected Le Clézio in the past ten years. Highly respected by Chinese scholars, he even became one of the doctoral tutors at Nanjing University. As more and more

of his works have been translated and introduced to China, more and more Chinese undergraduates and graduate students have chosen him as the subject of their dissertation, and more and more scholars have participated in the research about him. From 2010 to 2019, the number of research articles about Le Clézio was relatively stable, maintaining around 20 papers per year. In 2015, the number even exceeded 30. In the past three years, the number has remained at about 10 per year, with 12 articles in 2017, 9 articles in 2018, and 10 articles so far in 2019. Overall, the trend of Chinese research on Le Clézio and his works is growing in number and subject, and is becoming more comprehensive and systematic.

3. Le Clézio in the Eyes of Chinese Readers

As a well-known French writer, he has not attracted enough attention from Chinese general readers. This section will present the general situation of the reception of Le Clézio in China: an opposition between support and contempt.

3.1. Two Different Voices: Appreciation or Contempt

Having a great reputation, being voted the greatest French-speaking living writer in a poll held by the magazine *Lire*, Le Clézio is very famous in France, yet he has not attracted enough attention in China. Compared to other French writers of the 20th century introduced in China, Marguerite Duras and Milan Kundera for example, Le Clézio is the least known in the eyes of Chinese readers. According to the information mentioned above, even if increased after the announcement of the Nobel Prize, the Chinese translations of his works and the academic studies on him in China are not that numerous. Chinese general readers hardly know this writer, who is nevertheless appreciated and highly recommended by Chinese translators and scholars in literary circles.

Dong Qiang, a professor at Beijing University, said, “Le Clezio is a concise writer who pursues with all his strength a simplicity and refinement. His style of writing is described as a very fine gold thread without being broken.” [34] Yuan Xiaoyi, translator and professor at East China Normal University, praised Le Clézio’s words as poetic, his grammar and syntax are clear. “In his poetic language, he deliberately seeks an image of blooming and dazzling. Maybe it’s a method of writing that some writers have abandoned. For example, Marguerite Duras, she deliberately prefers to cut and ruin sentence structures. But Le Clézio, on the contrary, his grammar is clear and tidy.” [35] In addition, his understanding and criticism of Western modern civilization, his humanistic concern for the weak and the marginalized, are appreciated by Chinese literary scholars such as Xu Jun, Liu Mingjiu, etc. For example, Xu Jun praised Le Clézio in the preface to the second version of Chinese translation of *La Guerre*, “On the spiritual level, I believe that Le Clézio inherited the tradition of humanism from French writers since Rabelais” [36], “in addition to that, he also has a clear understanding and a strong critique of modern civilization. His particular pursuit

of literature has shown the aspiration of beauty and the discovery of reality in his creation of pure literature” [36], “with a clear conscience, he cares for the other, of the forgotten civilization, of human existence.” [36]

Following the announcement of the winner of Nobel Prize for Literature 2008, there emerged two different voices in literary circles in China.

The translators and literary critics of his works were very happy. According to them, Le Clézio deserved this honor. Xu Jun, especially, the translator who introduced the first Chinese translation of the work of Le Clézio in China, he was very happy when he heard that Le Clézio won the Nobel Prize. Since 2005, it was always Le Clézio that he recommended to the Swedish Academy as a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature. Yu Zhongxian, editor-in-chief of *World Literature*, believed it’s normal to award the Nobel Prize to Le Clézio, “among French-speaking living writers, Le Clézio, even if he is not the best, is one of the best anyway. He deserves this honor.” [37]

Although Le Clézio is well appreciated by translators and scholars of French literature in China, it’s difficult for him to be recognized by some Chinese writers, who dispute the quality of the winner of Nobel Prize. The writer QiuHua-dong believes that the works of Le Clézio lack scope. According to him, “his lack of scope is not only in the length of his work, but also in his subject, which often describes the condition of existence of the weak and marginalized.” [37] The poet Ye Kuangzheng directly stated in an interview that Le Clezio was only a minor writer. He believes that in the works of Le Clézio “there will be no profound influence on the world of adults, nor any distinct personality in his work, there is only the obsession of words” [38]. He thinks that the fact that Le Clézio won the Nobel Prize for Literature does not mean that he has engendered a profound influence on world literature. “In fact, it is a problem of seniority. The literary prize is like cutting the chives. This time it’s his turn. Nothing more. If his works are introduced in China, it’s because the translation of French literature in China is avant-garde, that is not to say that his work has a profound influence. It’s not like that.” [37] Moreover, many Chinese readers don’t even know who Le Clézio is, not to mention reading his works.

3.2. Opinions of Some Chinese Scholars on This Controversy

Faced with such a voice of disdain and doubt, some scholars could not help but write articles as powerful and polite refutation of these points of view.

Professor Dong Qiang from Beijing University analyzed the reasons for this controversy over Le Clézio in China. According to him, “Some of Le Clezio’s works have been translated, but these translations have not been widely recognized by Chinese readers. The influence of this writer is limited in the circle of French literature. He is less known than Kundera, Duras, even less than Modiano. I think it’s about the tone of Chinese contemporary literature. In general, Chinese readers prefer realistic works, which describe trivia, or show emotions directly and neatly. As for French literature, if Duras is well appreciated by Chinese readers, it’s because they appreciate the style, the language and the emotion

of her works; what we admire about Kundera is the politics, the sex, the philosophy, the plot, the profound demonstration of social system, the lyrical explosion in the sadness and helplessness of life. However, Le Clézio's works have little connection with what Chinese general readers are following closely. In a way, the two characteristics of Le Clézio's works: "globality and surrealism, are the blind spots of most Chinese readers." [39] Dong Qiang's analysis clearly showed the points of conflict between Le Clézio's writing and the reception of Chinese readers.

Yuan Xiaoyi, translator of some works of Le Clézio, professor of East China Normal University, gave her point of view about the reception of Le Clézio in China in an interview of *Literature Press*. According to her, Chinese translations of his works before the year 2008 were few and scattered. The narrative style of the beginning of his literary creation and the themes of his works are not very popular among Chinese readers. In short, Le Clézio is a classic French writer, known for his wonderful writings, but his works are not avant-garde, he never displays his art of writing in his works, his literary creation of so many years has become his life pursuit.

Xu Jun, professor at Nanjing University, who introduced the first Chinese translation of Le Clézio's book in China, accepted the interview with Yang Qing, a journalist of *Shenzhen Trade Journal*. He refuted the opinions of some Chinese writers like "Le Clézio is a minor writer", "his work lacks scope", etc. According to Xu Jun, "to criticize or understand a certain writer, one must first know him. We cannot reach a certain conclusion without a process of knowing and understanding." [40] "The works of Le Clézio can be considered in China as small works, not as great historical narratives. Chinese writers and literary circles do not have enough knowledge about Le Clézio and his works. I think the Nobel Prize for literature awarded to Le Clézio is not a label attached to him, but it is an opportunity for literary circles in China and around the world to know and understand this writer. Too easily jump to conclusion that Le Clézio is a mediocre writer without reading his works, this has also revealed the problem in literature critique circles in China abounding with impetuous commentaries." [40]

The article *Le Clézio and Us* written by Lu Shuyuan and Zhang Shouhai, published in *Contention in Literature and Art*, strongly refuted the scorn on Le Clézio of some Chinese scholars. "It is already an unmistakable fact today that literature can only attract the attention or interest of the general public (including most critics) when it becomes a public event, a media event. Following this logic, if the Nobel Prize for Literature is awarded by Chinese critics, it is possible to give it to Mu Zimei or Miss Fu Rong, if she writes too" [41], "It is possible that you do not agree with the choice of the path of literature of Le Clézio, that you do not accept the mode of his literary creation, but you cannot deny a writer so easily. The scorn and mockery of some critics, indeed, only show their frivolity and impetuosity." [41]

Generally speaking, these Chinese scholars participated in the translation and introduction of Le Clézio's works in China, so they have a better understanding

of the connotation of his words and his writing style, they can express their opinions objectively and impartially. With an attitude of appreciation and support, they do not think Le Clézio is a third-rate writer. On the contrary, he is a literary giant worthy of appreciation.

4. Conclusion

After winning the Nobel Prize, the number and speed of translations of Le Clézio's works have increased rapidly. With the introduction of his works to the Chinese market through translation, the academic research on his literary creation also witnessed explosive growth after his award. In recent years, with the active promotion of Chinese scholars, Le Clézio has come to China many times to maintain close exchanges and has received the attention and admiration of experts and enthusiasts studying foreign literature. In general, the Nobel Prize has increased Le Clézio's fame in China, but he is still a "minority" in the perception of Chinese general readers. Compared to other famous French writers in the 20th century, Le Clézio is not well known among Chinese readers, and the sales of his books are not among the top. His influence mainly stays in the circle of foreign literature researchers.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- [1] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (1983) *Désert*. Hunan People's Publishing House, Changsha.
- [2] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (1992) *Le Procès-verbal*. Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House, Hefei.
- [3] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (1992) *Mondo et autres histoires*. Lijiang Publishing House, Guilin.
- [4] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (1994) *La Guerre*. Yilin Press, Nanjing.
- [5] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (1998) *Étoile errante*. Huacheng Publishing House, Guangzhou.
- [6] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2000) *Poisson d'or*. Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House, Tianjin.
- [7] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2007) *Ourania*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [8] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2009) *La Ronde et autres faits divers*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [9] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2009) *Raga. Approche du continent invisible*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [10] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2009) *Ritournelle de la faim*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [11] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2010) *Les Géants*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [12] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2010) *Onitsha*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [13] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2010) *Coeur brûlé et autres romances*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.

- [14] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2012) *Le Rêvemexicainou la penséeinterrompue*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [15] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2012) *Hasard*. Shanghai Translation Publishing House, Shanghai.
- [16] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2012) *Le livre des fuites*. Shanghai Translation Publishing House, Shanghai.
- [17] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2012) *Diego etFrida*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [18] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2012) *L'Africain*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [19] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2013) *Histoire du pied etaautresfantaisies*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [20] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2013) *Le Chercheurd'or*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [21] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2014) *Voyage à Rodrigues*. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, Shanghai.
- [22] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2016) *Ballaciner*. Jilin Publishing Group, Jilin.
- [23] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2016) *Lullaby*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [24] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2016) *Voyage au pays des arbres*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [25] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2017) *Gens des nuages*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [26] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2018) *Tempête*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [27] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2018) *Révolutions*. People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing.
- [28] Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2018) *La littératureetnotre monde*. Yilin Press, Nanjing.
- [29] Wang, M. and Le Clézio, J.M.G. (2019) The Dialogue between Wang Meng and J.M.G. Le Clézio. People's Publishing House, Beijing.
- [30] Tan, C.C. (2009) An Overview of J.M.G. Le Clézio and His Writing. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, **2**, 72-80.
- [31] Gao, F. and Xu, J. (2009) On J.M.G. Le Clézio's Writing. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, **2**, 62-71.
- [32] Yuan, X.Y. (2009) Exploring the Allegorical World of Humanity in the Works of J.M.G. Le Clézio. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, **2**, 81-85.
- [33] Xu, J. (2009) The Literary Creation and the Humanistic Ideals of Le Clézio. An Interview with the Winner of the 2008 Nobel Prize for Literature. *Foreign Literature Studies*, **2**, 1-8.
- [34] Dong, Q. (2008) The Nobel Prize Was Awarded to a Nomadic Writer. *Southern People Weekly*, Oct. 27, 79.
- [35] Yuan, X.Y. (1996) A Perfect Combination of Modernity and Classics: Reading Le Clezio's Wandering Stars. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, **4**, 80.
- [36] Li, Y.M. and Yuan, X.Y. (2008) *La Guerre*. Yilin Press, Nanjing.
- [37] Fu, X.P. (2008) Le Clézio's Award Has Caused Controversy in the Chinese Literary Circle: Experts Are Optimistic, But Readers Do Not Buy It. *Literature Press*, Oct. 16, Version 4.
- [38] Cang, Z. (2008) Third-Rate Writer or Literary Master? What Chinese Readers Think of Le Clezio. *Shenzhen Trade Journal*, Oct. 13, Version 6.
- [39] Dong, Q. (2008) Le Clézio: Him and His Works. *China Reading Weekly*, Oct. 15,

Version 5.

- [40] Yang, Q. (2008) Xu Jun: Don't Jump to Conclusion without Reading His Works. Shenzhen Trade Journal, Oct. 13, Version C04.
- [41] Lu, S.Y. and Zhang, S.H. (2009) Le Clézio and Us. *Contention in Literature and Art*, **1**, 110-111.