CHAPTER 2

From Tianhui to Chengdu: Geopoetics and Historical Imagination

Untamed Novel Boundaries

When Li Jieren started to compose his trilogy in the mid-1930s, more than two decades had passed since 1911. It was the ‘political’ birth of the region that inspired the novelist to memorialize Chengdu in the form of historical fiction. The trilogy, however, was more concerned with depicting the profound socio-cultural evolution brought to his native place by the revolution than the immediate effects of the political event itself. For a long time, Li had been conceiving a grand scheme of sequential novels about late Qing society. He invented an ingenuous narrative scheme in the form of a roman-fleuve, and drew on the capaciousness of its narrative patterns to capture the historical sweep of his novels. In this way, Li set out to resolve the formal question of how the social panorama could deal with the impasse of epic narrativity that had bothered his late Qing predecessors as well as his contemporaries.

The notion of the river-novel, derived from the French term roman-fleuve, connotes a group of monumental social historical novels by Balzac, Zola, Alexandre Dumas (1802–70), and other French authors whom Li Jieren had read during his years in France. While in France, Li was much less interested in the avant-garde than in the realist and naturalist authors of the previous century. He translated some of the realist and regional fictions by Prévost, the Goncourt brothers, Maupassant, and Flaubert, and was also inspired by the panoramic social historical novels of Zola and Balzac. This experience allowed him to gaze critically back at the local and to translate and transfigure his home place in terms of more global literary sensibilities.


117 Li stayed relatively briefly in Paris (1920–21), and spent more time in Montpellier (1921–24) in southern France where he earned a living by doing translations and writing articles for periodicals in Shanghai and Chengdu.
As a generic concept, the *roman-fleuve* was first coined by French critics of the early 1930s to reflect the surge of an increasingly popular literary form in France during the first half of the twentieth century. Besides Balzac’s and Zola’s works of the nineteenth century, the most notable examples of the *roman-fleuve* include Romain Rolland’s (1866–1944) ten-volume *Jean-Christophe* (1905–12), and Marcel Proust’s (1871–1922) seven-part *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, 1913–27). Rolland first used the river metaphor in his preface to *Jean-Christophe* to describe his own work in the genre. The *roman-fleuve* denotes a series of novels—each complete in itself—following the life of one central character, a group of characters, or successive generations of a family to depict change within the larger social unit of the community, or within the individual, in a continuous narrative flow.

As Lynette Felber remarks, the most unique feature of the *roman-fleuve* is the multiplicity of plots; no longer do plot lines conform to the linearity of a beginning, middle, and ending. The *roman-fleuve* inherently privileges narrative openness over closure, and “it differs from the long novel in its prevalent use of extraneous narrative substructures, extractable narratives within the comprehensive framework of the whole novel. Whereas in the long novel various plot lines and characters eventually converge, in the *roman-fleuve* many are, or seem to be, dispensable.” In short, the *roman-fleuve* shifts from a rather strictly defined narrative format to a more diffuse pattern of expansiveness, proliferation, and connection, which complicate closure and unity. The dynamics of plot suggest that “a thorough preconception of the details and structure of the entire work is unlikely.”

The expansiveness of the *roman-fleuve* allows a monumentality in depicting change within the larger social unit, the community, or within the individual. It also poses both practical and aesthetic problems that may have relegated it to the margins of the canon. The genre lends itself well to such vast subjects such as “*bildung*, social change, history, and time,” but the length and complexity of the *roman-fleuve* make it fall into the lacunae in the critical space of our

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118 According to Romain Rolland, his novel “n’est apparu comme un fleuve […] il est, dans le cours des fleuves, des zones où ils s’étendent, semblent dormir […] ils n’en continuent pas moins de couler et changer […]” ([It] seemed to be like a river […] there are, in the course of rivers, zones where they extend as if they are sleeping […] they continue no less to flow and change). See Harvey and Heseltine, eds., *The Oxford Companion to French Literature*, p. 632. For a narrative history of the *roman-fleuve* and its French connections, see Coward, *A History of French Literature*, pp. 388–91.

119 Felber, *Gender and Genre in Novels without End*, p. 2. Felber looks at a number of British sequence novels as the British equivalents of the *roman-fleuve*.

120 Ibid., p. 14.