

## A CASE STUDY ON THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE CULTURAL EXCHANGE BETWEEN CHINA & ROMANIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Literary reception is the focal point of several areas of research, including communication, literary studies, but also economy, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies. Thus, the theory of reception is vivid and abundant, changing instinctively its influences and valences, being open to the construction of new ramifications in areas, often related but, more frequently, different, such as economy, politics and international relations.*

*The overall objective of the present research is to closely analyse literary translations from Chinese into Romanian from the point of view of cultural reception and to reflect and investigate what this strategy involves before and after translation. This paper proposes, thus, an extended approach to cultural translations, an approach to the sociology of translations, to their cultural, linguistic, literary, political and economic reception. In achieving the proposed objectives, the research expands far beyond the literary text itself, to its macro context. This paper will analyse a series of interviews with Romanian translators of Chinese literary works, investigating, through a qualitative exploratory research, the role of translators in the cultural exchange between China and Romania and their influence on cultural, political and economic relations between the two countries.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Chinese translation, economic constraints, mediation, socio-cultural reception, socio-political agents.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of the reception of a translated literature is important in order to show the influences that the literary text, mainly the translated one, has on the reader, on his / her perception of the text and the echoes produced by the text on the level of reader's consciousness in terms of the understanding and acceptance or rejection of a culture through the literary work. Throughout this paper, translations are understood as social practices, integrated in the cultural context in which they are born and received. In this regard, translations have to be studied from three perspectives:

1. As a transfer between nations and societies, translations involve, initially, **international relations** as a reciprocal exchange.
2. On a more detailed level, translations are involved in the **political, economic and cultural dynamics** of the exchange.
3. Nevertheless, translations depend strongly on the **structure of the reception space** and on the way the relevant **mediators** prepare the horizon of reception.

Reception theory is the meeting point for several colliding but also distinct fields of research, among which that of communication, literary studies, but also psychology, sociology, ethnology and cultural studies. Due to this fruitful intersection of different influences and perspectives, the

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theory of reception is a vivid, multidimensional field of research, which requires a thorough study, too expanded, of course, for the present paper. Reception theory is an active one, open to new valences, influences and frequently on the verge of change and development. The importance of this theory in the research of the development of Sino-Romanian relations on the social, economic and political and by all means, cultural and literary level is necessary for the understanding of the way translated Chinese works were received by the Romanian readers throughout different periods of time in the history of both countries, i.e. from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until present days. This kind of retrospective analysis of the historical and cultural reception of Chinese literature tries mapping the most active moments and the periods of stagnation in China-Romania relationship, pointing on the relationship between the social, political and economic changes in Romania and the quantitative and qualitative values of the reception of Chinese literature.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 The sociology of translations

The **sociology of translations and literary reception**, as researched by Pierre Bourdieu, is in contradiction with the interpretative approach to text, and also with the economic analysis of international exchange. **The interpretative approach** has its roots in hermeneutics and has the role of giving access to the meaning and unicity of the text. **The economic approach**, less frequently seen in translation studies, gets rid of the unicity and singularity of the text and author, and includes translations and books in a larger category of commerce goods, which are sold, distributed and consumed according to the logic of the national and international market. The recent **sociological approach** (Heilbron & Sapiro, 2017) however, splits the two somehow limited and contradictory analyses and includes in its research a set of complex social relationships.

The sociological perspective of literature reception broadens the research area proposed by Jauss (1982). Contrary to hermeneutical and Marxist theories, Jauss promoted an anti-positivist literary history based on a concept of reception, conceived as a history of the effects produced by literary works. His key concept is the Horizon of Expectations borrowed from Edmund Husserl, Karl Mannheim and Karl Popper (Sapiro, 2016), developed through a diachronic analysis of the readings process and which consists of the lecturer's knowledge of genres and poetics, of the works produced in the same historical and literary context, of the opposition between literary style and everyday language, imaginary world and everyday reality (Jauss, 1978).

The horizon of expectation is therefore the set of references that make a work possible to be understood at a certain historical moment. The meaning of the text, although inscribed in the text, is reborn with each reading, thus revealing its meanings and value. If for Jauss the reader is abstract, erudite, with a hermeneutical attitude to the text; from a sociological perspective, the reader is a real character, and the research object consists of the material and intellectual aspects of the creation and dissemination of the literary text as well as the selection procedure, categorization and evaluation - literary criticism, literature awards, institutional consecration, sales etc. - through which the literary work is categorized. The recent approach of the sociology of reception is interested in the **functions of translations** in their context of production and reception, in the target culture. The analysis of the relationship between the production context and the reception context supports the historical study of cultural transfers that investigates the **role of agents / mediators**, institutions or individuals, and their influence on political, economic and cultural relations between the two countries.

A sociological approach to translations addresses the translators, publishers and publishing houses, whose role in the international circulation of texts is crucial. Mediation is thus an important point in research of reader's reception of the text, as it plays a primordial role in the way the text is received, being an external influence on the quality and characteristics of the text per se. Reception is mediated firstly by the editorial work as Genette noted (Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation., 1997): dedication from the beginning of the book, introduction, preface, postscript, abstract on the

back cover, citations, opinions of other authors etc. Since the early 19th century, when the book industry has grown, publishers and publishing houses have played an important role, not only in the editorial part of the creation of the book, but also in the dissemination, the design of the cover, the presentation of the book on the cover, the information on the publisher's web site, flyers for libraries and retailers, advertisements in the media or through presentations at various book fairs, launches and public readings. The writer, if she/he lives, is more or less involved in this process. So the online & offline media - through newspapers, professional magazines, brochures, books, journals, presentations in the virtual space, presence on social networks through various methods (tag, check-in, share) - intensely participate in the text reception process, forming the framework of perception and inclusion of the book in a certain category.

After the book is published, the reception is mediated by the **interpretation and strategies of understanding** of the work of **various agents** - individuals and institutions - whether professionals (publishers, critics, reviewers, translators, literary agents, juries, academies) or amateurs belonging to the literary environment (reading clubs) or other media such as the economic, legal, political one (cultural services of the embassies, national institutions supporting translation, book fairs); universities also play an important role by including the works in the curriculum, by recommending them for doctoral research, or by including them in papers, articles, conferences and other scientific events dedicated to certain authors or books.

**Literary criticism** is another mediator in the reception and valorisation of the literary work, and its existence signals a certain level of institutionalization of literary activity. This, along with other aspects of reception, can greatly influence the evolution of the author, both nationally and internationally, if the target audience is part of the dominant cultures that impose the trend.

**Economic considerations**, including sales, copyright costs, translation costs, costs with book launch events, author invitations, advertising etc., often occur in the decision concerning the publishing, translation and dissemination of a work. However, ideally, cultural motivation, national literary impact and cultural rejuvenation should be the benchmarks in this process. From this perspective, the dissemination and spread of literature through translation - the most important mediation factor in reception - stimulates research at cultural, social, political, economic level, in order to analyse their role as mediators but also the effects that these influences have on international exchange of literature.

Interestingly to be noticed is also the impact that translation has on the **source culture**, but also on the author, who can become more famous, can be recognized at international level through distinctions and awards. This is in particular the case of authors from cultures and peripheral languages (but this is also the case of Chinese writers), who are translated into dominant languages and can become better known abroad and inside their nation, through the translations received. They, consequently, get to adjust their style and writing strategies for the foreign reader, the reader of the translation. Translated literature from peripheral cultures is often observed through "ethnographic eyes" (Sapiro, 2016), which can give to the work of non-Western authors an exotic dimensions; the reception of their works being an integral part of the construction or confirmation / rejection of a stereotypical representation of the society.

The works of Yu Hua, Mo Yan, Su Tong, A Cheng, to name only a few contemporary Chinese writers are true examples of the success of literary works acquired through adaptation, through reproduction of written text into another culture and linguistic medium, through translation, but also through screening. It is recognized by both the authors and the sales figures that the translations and screening adaptations of their works have brought greater recognition of the book, especially outside the country.

Therefore, research of the international transfer through translation of cultural, literary works, must take into account certain aspects: (1) the structure of the international cultural exchange environment; (2) the type of political and economic constraints that influence these exchanges; and

(3) intermediary agents and the process of importing and receiving in the target culture (Heilbron & Sapiro, 2017).

Constraints on the creation and share of cultural works of literature can be placed between two extremes: one with a high level of politicization and the other with a high level of commercialization (Sapiro, 2003). Thus, in countries where the economic environment is subordinated to politics, and cultural institutions are governed by state instruments, the production and distribution of cultural goods is strongly politicized. At the opposite end, cultural exchanges are governed by the logic of the market, where cultural goods are seen primarily as commercial products that must be subject to profit laws; and where publishing activity is dominated by large companies that impose the criterion of profitability and trading activity to the detriment of cultural and literary logic. Between these two extremes, we find various configurations where the importance of political and economic factors varies according to the needs of culture, the national market, and the level of cultural involvement. However, the trend tends to be towards the economic influences on the translation process; export agencies, as they are named by Heilbron (2008)-official cultural institutions, diplomatic bodies, translation institutes, cultural attachés, etc., give up some of the power to import agents - translators, literary agents, editors, reviewers, etc.

Translation is ultimately an entity in the equation of power relations between countries, beyond any other political considerations. For a nation, the translation of its literature is only a symbol of its international recognition. This is the reason behind which more and more states allocate generous funding for the export of their literary works; China being a perfect example.

## 2.2 Intermediary agents and the import in reception process

The practice of translations is involved both in the international book market (economic factors) and in international relations between countries (political factors). From the historical point of view, the emergence of the international translation market is closely linked to the cultural formation of national identity and the development of book sales. This exchange, which originally belonged strictly to formal and official exchanges between countries, began to be organized at the end of the nineteenth century on the occasion of the 1886 International Convention for the Protection of Works of Art and Letters in Berne (Sapiro, 2008).

Currently, literary exchanges are organized within individual institutions and agencies, each of different political, economic and cultural dynamics. The process of cultural construction of national identity (Thiesse, 1999), closely linked to state formation and competition within the sphere of influence, implies certain rules of diplomatic and cultural exchange, often delegated to authorities - embassies, diplomatic bodies, cultural institutes, literary journals. In addition, the industrialization of the book market, the growing interest in culture, and the number of readers, the liberalization of international cultural exchange, favoured the emergence of specialized groups in the international exchange of translated literature, acting as cultural mediators.

Thus, the international environment in which the exchange of literature takes place is not the only factor in understanding the dynamics of the exchange of literature through translation, the framework for reception playing another important role. The latter is also governed by certain political and economic constraints, in addition to those mentioned earlier - methods of consecration through literary awards and distinctions, editorial policies, the reputation of the translator, etc.

The sociological approach to translations - as social practices - also considers that the **editorial team** has a crucial role both for the original work and for the translation. The editor, remarked Bourdieu (1977), in the article *La Production from Croyance*, has the role of giving credit to the literary work, of transferring the symbolic capital from him to the author - "to publish is to consecrate" (Bourdieu, 1977). Following this logic, the publisher creates the author. In the process of selection of publishing works, the editorial group (made up of various publishers, writers and translators who recommend the manuscript) functions as a "source of social and symbolic capital"

(Bourdieu, 2008). Bourdieu's analyses have demonstrated the relevance of publishers in studying translations.

Some key questions prove to be helpful in looking for answers about the global circulation of literature - What are the criteria for selecting translation books? How are translators chosen? What are the chosen literary genres? What is the balance between economic and symbolic criteria? How are the different languages represented in the selection of books?

The following part will attempt to address these questions in regard to the translation of Chinese literature in Romania.

### **3. INTERVIEWS WITH THE TRANSLATORS OF CHINESE LITERATURE IN ROMANIA**

#### **3.1 Methodology & Respondents**

The results of the research are mainly based on 11 structured, in-depth interviews with all the active translators of Chinese literature in Romania, who have at least one translation published and available for purchase in a Romanian publishing house. These interviews are completed by interviews with editors from Romanian publishing houses; the social agents responsible of the import of Chinese culture in Romania (PRC Embassy in Romania, Confucius Institutes in Romania, Ministry of Foreign Affairs – division of culture, bilateral relations, Romanian Diplomatic Institute, Cultural Institute of Romania).

The chosen method was structured interview, therefore the same series of questions were addressed to all interviewees; the questions were created prior to the interview; the interview included several open-ended questions; questioning was standardized and the ordering and phrasing of the questions was kept consistent from interview to interview; the questions were in a neutral tone, with several "test-retest" questions.

THE GENERAL OBJECTIVE of this interview was to investigate, through a qualitative exploratory research, the **role of translators in the cultural exchange between China and Romania through the translation** into Romanian of works of Chinese literature and their influence on cultural, political and economic relations between the two countries.

The specific objectives are derived from the purpose of research, and their definition is to determine the tools, translation methods and, in particular, all factors of influence in the translation process, both prior to the selection of the work to be translated, during the translation and after the translation has been completed.

#### **SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES:**

Objective 1 - Determine ways to address **cultural references**

Objective 2 - Identify linguistic and cultural factors; the **problems of equivalence** and cases of untranslatability; the methods and strategies used to ensure an adequate cultural translation of Chinese texts into Romanian;

Objective 3 – Determine the factors of **ideological, economic, political influence** and their implications in the translation of Chinese books into Romania;

Objective 4 - Identify the characteristics of the **cultural reception of Chinese literature in Romania;**

Objective 5 - Identify the characteristics of **literary reception of Chinese literature** has been introduced in Romania;

Objective 6 - Identify the characteristics of **linguistic acceptance of Chinese literature in Romania.**

Aiming to reach the specific objectives, the interview was structured on 6 sections:

- I. Determining ways to address cultural references and identification of the problems and solutions for equivalence;
- II. Identifying the cultural reception of Chinese literature in Romania;
- III. Identifying the literary reception of Chinese literature in Romania;
- IV. Identifying the linguistic reception of Chinese literature in Romania;
- V. Determination of the factors of ideological, economic, political influence and their implications in the translation of Chinese literature in Romania
- VI. Identification

The present paper will focus only on the results of the second and fifth section, i.e. the **cultural reception and the ideological, economic and political influences in translations.**

### **3.2 Cultural Reception**

#### **3.2.1 Cultural impact of Chinese translations**

The cultural impact of Romanian translations of Chinese literature was recognised by some of the respondents, who consider that translations, the main carrier of culture from China to Romania has, definitely, an impact on the understanding of China in its humanist nature, beyond the commercial and political one that comes to us through the media. Literature brings the Romanian reader closer to the average Chinese, with their ordinary life and feelings. Besides the cultural understanding, a greater trust in inter-human relations is to be driven from the circulation of Chinese literature in Romania. The increasing number of translations is also a method to correct old clichés and to form a new horizon of reception, to give birth to a new intercultural dialog.

There were, however also a great part of respondents who consider that the impact is still very low, reaching only a small niche target group, the one who is already interested and knowledgeable about China and that it does not manifest in any particular manner. The impact on the Romanian public at large is minimum, but on the niche target the recent translations help enrich the knowledge and trust in China and strengthen the bilateral relations.

#### **3.2.2 Increased knowledge and popularity of Chinese Culture and Civilization in Romania**

The Chinese literary text translated in Romania brings China closer to Romanian public, being one of the few media who takes this responsibility, enriching mostly the Romanians' knowledge about China, not necessary the popularization of Chinese culture. Most importantly, the old exotic reception erodes, as mediation is no longer necessary. Translation of Chinese literature in Romania started during the first years of Romanian Communism, when the number of works translated from Chinese was massively dominating the translations from Asia. The first Romanian translation of Chinese literature was in 1950s, a novel of Din Lin, from the *Chinese free literature*, which was done through the Russian version of the text.

Several decades later, during which Chinese works were known to the Romanian public through translations from Russian, French or English, the 2018 Romanian reader has the privilege to read first hand translations, done directly from Chinese by very well experienced Romanian sinologists and translators, most of them with academic careers in Romanian universities. Thus, the old, exotic reception of Chinese culture can finally erode. Chinese culture is now transferred from a direct source, with no mediation, and not only the linguistic competences, but also the authentic knowledge in Chinese culture & civilization of the translator implies credibility.

The general impression of the respondents is that there is an improved popularity of Chinese culture owned to translation of Chinese literature, which enlarges the horizon of those interested, but there are still gaps in the knowledge of Romanians about China.

Those truly interested in Chinese culture and China, in general, can broaden their horizons through the translated literature, but those marked by a deformed political vision - that of a communism close to the North Korean - remain stuck in rejection and perpetuate old clichés.

Most of the text translated in Romanian are centred on the same events in China's history - *The Great Leap, Cultural Revolution*, but China cannot be reduced to these events, thus the translations can help Romanian public get to know China better, but in a fragmentary manner, not in its whole.

Unfortunately, the number of Chinese texts is still small, the range of choices of Romanian editors and publishing houses proves the shy interest of ordinary Romanians for Chinese culture. The translators acknowledged that there is a Romanian public interested in non- European literature, but there is not such a large public consuming Chinese literature. Publishers generally know the taste of the public (or "what sells"), and their hesitations to translate more Chinese literature suggest that Chinese literature is still not the most popular for the Romanian audience. Therefore the still little number of translated texts cannot have the desired impact on the increase of knowledge and popularity of Chinese culture and civilization in Romania that it could have.

### **3.2.3 The role of publishing houses in the cultural reception of the translation**

The main role of the publishing house is in choosing what it is translated and promoted. The publishing houses contribute to the promotion of translated books through cultural events, open talks with the public, and invitation of important guests, specialists in Chinese culture, etc. The publishing house is an important vector in the reception. In their capacity of Institution they should also educate the public, which can be done mainly through the quality of the selected text, but unfortunately, Romanian publishing houses are first of all private businesses and the selected texts must sell.

If the publishers were genuinely interested in cultural dialogue, intellectual capital and not the financial factor, the publishing house should play a crucial role. The respondents noted also that the editorial market in Romania does not have its own system of critical evaluation of the Chinese book, and the selection is mainly based on the value system of the West. Recently the Chinese have started to offer funds for the export of Chinese texts in Romania, based on their own selection criteria.

The range of choices of Romanian editors and translators proves the shy, but growing interest of the reader in Chinese literature, mainly contemporary one. In recent years, notably after the writer Mo Yan was awarded with Nobel Prize for Literature, the interest of Romanian readers and publishers to find out more about the literature that produced such a writer has increased considerably.

### **3.2.4 The role of universities and academics in the mediation of reception of the translated text**

The unanimous response of the interviewees was that Romanian universities are a true ambassador of Chinese culture in general and Chinese literature in particular. The activity of their professors and sinologists, who recommend and encourage the translations, participate in the launch events and write articles and reviews about the book and translation, aim to help the reception of the author and the text through explanations about the background, characteristics of Chinese literature and the message of the specific book. Nevertheless, the university has the role to train good translators with a good understanding of Chinese culture and civilization, in order to transpose in a faithful and intelligible manner the text for the Romanian reader.

### **3.3 The Ideological, Economic and Political Factors of Influence and their Implication in the Translation of Chinese Literature in Romania**

Research of the transfer through translation of Chinese literature in Romania, must take into account certain aspects, among which the type of political and economic aspects that influence these exchanges.

### **3.3.1 Selection criteria for text to be translated and the influence of the publishing house**

In accordance with the theory of sociology of translations, the result of the interview for this question was that generally the publishing house selects the books, based on their own criteria (mostly financial) and then they find a translator for the text. There were only two respondents who had the opportunity to choose some texts on their own choice, based on the educational potential of the book and on their cultural and professional interest and whose choice were accepted by the publishing house.

Concerning the manner and strategy of translation the choice is the translator's mainly, with very few interferences of the editors in terms of lowering the number of footnotes, neologisms, lowering the number of phonetic transcription even of the names, and preference for translating them (a clear preference for domestication, for easing the job of the reader).

### **3.3.2 The literary genres selected**

In terms of the literary genres selected for translations, the prose has a wider popularity, taking in consideration both the affinities of the translators, but also its capacity of transferring a message clearer and easier than philosophical texts or poetry, which would have even a smaller impact on the Romanian reader.

### **3.3.3 Balance between symbolic and economic criteria**

Asked if they balance the economic and symbolic aspects of the selected text, the majority of the translators did not have a personal opinion, as the selection does not belong to them. For the one that had the opportunity to have published her own selected text, the symbolic and educative potential of the book overcame the economic potential. However, the general consent was that given China's economic performance, the choice of translation was naturally influenced by the economic power of the country. In this sense, a country's economic power is useful in generating attractiveness for both the publishers and the translators, if the attraction generated is not given by purely utilitarian purposes. The conclusion was that although China is becoming the "cultural magnet of Asia", with a growing global interest in culture, language and values, it was China's economic capabilities and its moral characteristics and Confucian humanitarianism, that have helped to improve its reputation and increase its attractiveness for the Romanian and foreign book market, in general.

### **3.3.4 Increased request for translations based in the intensified Sino-Romanian relations**

Contrary to the general opinion and to one of the research's premises also, the opinion of the translators is that there is no strong stimulation and intensification of the bilateral relations of China and Romania, especially from the Romanian side, who does not have any initiative in the strengthening of the collaboration. Their opinion is that the increase in request for translations is based on the economic power of China and the recognition at international level of the quality of Chinese literature (through various international awards or literary events).

The same question was addressed also to the Chinese representative of the Romanian Cultural Institute from Beijing and to the PRC Embassy in Romania, who consider that the cultural exchange through translations between China and Romania is, at present, much more satisfying than the political and commercial ones.

### **3.3.5 The interconnectivity between the number of translations and the intensification of relations, or how the intensification of bilateral relations can be encouraged by the increased number of translated works**

Most of the respondents considered that translations do not have a strong effect on the dynamics of the Sino-Romanian bilateral relations. However, there were also opinions that considered that the intensified collaboration on the translation and publishing level encourages and determines a more

active cooperation in general. One explanation of this perception is that the intensification of the translation and publishing activity of Chinese literary works has begun only in the past few years and the effects are not yet very visible. The effects will definitely be visible in the near future; "we must be patient" noted the Chinese president of the Romanian Cultural Institute from Beijing during the interview. However, one cannot deny that Chinese books are more and more frequent in the publishing houses, in the libraries (where they are frequently placed in very visible spots), in conferences and in other academic and cultural events.

### **3.3.6 The way in which Romania's cultural diplomacy and international relations with China influences the dynamics of translations of Chinese works**

Romania's cultural diplomacy towards China especially is perceived by the translators as "almost inexistent", as there is no official strong project or initiative for the encouragement and support of translation from Chinese literature in Romanian. The initiatives come only from the Chinese authorities, who support through strong and well developed projects the translation of Chinese literature. As it was also remarked by recent theories of reception Heilbron (2008), the trend tends to prove that the economic influences on the translation process, are stronger than the political ones. This is to be seen also in China-Romania exchange of literature, where the most significant factor, until now, proved to be the economic one.

### **3.3.7 The influence of Chinese cultural institutes on the choice of books translated**

The influence of Chinese institutes is felt quite strongly on the entire process of publication of Chinese literature, mainly due to financial reasons and sponsorship projects; as some books are funded by them, they become the main target of Romanian publishing houses, and the criterion is not necessarily a qualitative one. China's promoted books typically come in the sphere of Chinese soft power and the translators believe that they want to rewrite the history of China in a more Western manner, to offer their own variant of orientalism, and to tell their story through their own language and way of perceiving the reality. However the choice for the books translated generally belongs to the publishing house.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Throughout this paper, translation was used as an indicator of cultural diversity in the book market. This empirical case study provides some answers to the question concerning the global circulation of books and the role of translators in the cultural exchange between China and Romania and their influence on cultural, political and economic relations between the two countries. The interviews with the Romanian translators of Chinese literary works confirmed some of the theories but also contradicted some premises, which proves that each space of reception has its own peculiarities. The results of the study show that not only the author, the book or the translator are shaping the reception of the work, but the publisher, driven frequently by economic considerations, plays a major role in the process of legitimating the literary products. The publisher is the one creating the image of the author and the book in the receiving culture, which is awarded by all the participants in the recognition chain. However, the interviews have shown that the economic factors are not sufficient to explain the translational power relations between Romania and China, cultural, political and sociological factors must be taken into account. The results driven from the interviews are also a starting point for some recommendations for the improvement of the reception and dissemination of Chinese literature and culture in Romania, through a more active involvement of the state and cultural institutions in the support and encouragement of translations.

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