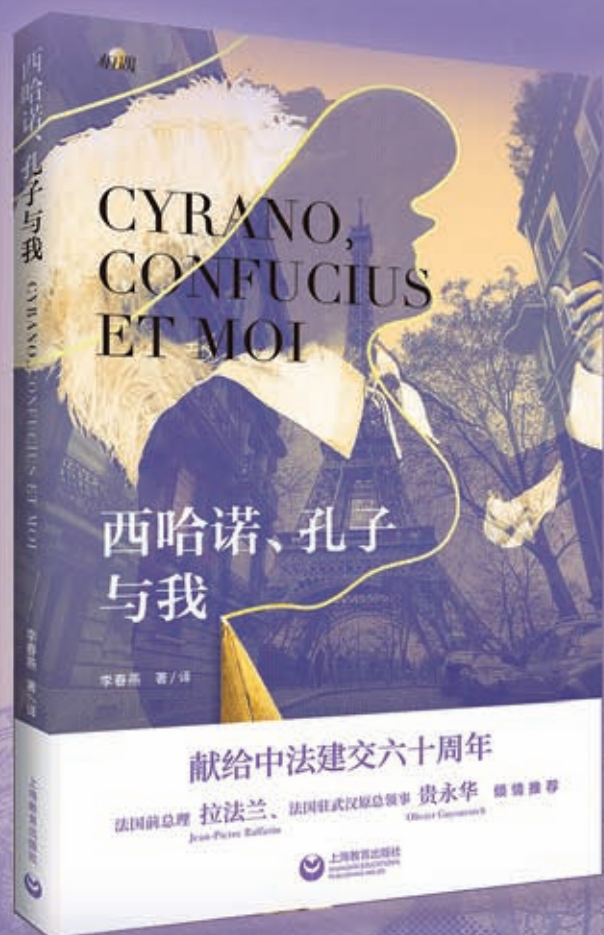


AU CONTRAIRE!

Confronting cultural clichés in the City of Light



Li (left) poses with former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin at Maison de l'Amérique Latine in 2016, at an event she co-organized with Fondation Prospective et Innovation.



Li (right), age 6, poses with her cousin in front of a textile factory at her home village in Nantong, Jiangsu Province.

Yao Minji

“What do you think of communism?” Li Chunyan was a bit stunned when the mother of her Parisian boyfriend asked the question when they met in 2006, just a little over two years after she moved to the French capital. “I didn’t see that coming,” she told Shanghai Daily, recalling the barbed question. “And I never had really thought about it much. So I tried my best to explain that, to me, it meant a sense of people helping one another to have better lives.”

The mother apparently had her own less generous ideas about communism. She pressed her son to break up with Li. He eventually did.

Li was 24 when she went to Paris. Coming from a village more than 100 kilometers north of Shanghai, it was a heady experience to be in the romantic environment described in the translated French novels she began reading at age 7.

Li’s autobiography detailing her experiences and impressions of life in France as well as cultural shocks will hit the bookshelves of China tomorrow, in translation from the original French text. Its Chinese version is entitled “Cyrano, Confucius and Me.”

The book recounts how a small village girl made her way to Peking University, one of China’s best universities, and then to HEC, one of Europe’s most prestigious business schools. She has become a business consultant advising executives of major European firms and an entrepreneur launching economic and cultural projects between China and France.

With detailed descriptions and keen wit, Li shares her ups and downs during the nearly 20 years she lived in France, including that break-up with her first boyfriend.

Her ex, she wrote, kept a Teddy bear on his bed that nobody could touch. It was a gift from his mother and a sure sign that he was a “momma’s boy.” To this day, Li still believes her “communist” answer played a part in the split — that, and her coming from a small Chinese village.

“That was the first time I realized that in the France I loved, there was something beyond cultural differences,” she said during a trip to Shanghai. “There was a lot of prejudice and misunderstanding when it comes to China.”

She added, “At first, I wanted to write it down. Later, I wanted to know why. And then, I wanted to bridge the gap with what little I could do. I hope