

What China Means to Us in Argentina. How to Refill a Magic Box

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China has always been very far from Argentina, not only in geographic terms but in many different ways as well. This huge, legendary land, represents for us the perfect image of the *non plus ultra* (no further on), the farthest, and more extreme point on earth.

We use a very popular colloquial expression: “De acá a la China” (from here to China) when we wish to indicate the firm will to do something, no matter the sacrifice, distance, or time it takes.

We also say that something is “chino básico” (basic Chinese language), if it is impossible to understand. When children disobey their mothers, as if they didn’t hear them, there comes the scolding: “What’s happening with you? Am I talking in Chinese?”

But existence is made of paradoxes. Another colloquial expression is “Vamos al chino” (let’s go to the Chinaman). The “Chinaman” is always the closest Chinese store (a store managed by a Chinese family; or maybe by a Korean or Vietnamese one, but we, ignorant people, call them all Chinese). These mini supermarkets within the neighborhoods are always open. Nothing is more friendly than the “Chinese store” if you really need something and it is late in the night. China, while so distant, couldn’t be more present in our daily life.

We have literature and films about the Chinese immigration and those Chinese supermarkets brought to our country by the globalization process in the last ‘90s. Novels such as César Aira’s *El mármol* (2011)–The Marble-- or Ariel Magnus’ *Un chino en bicicleta* (2007)–A Chinaman on a bicycle-- deal with our cultural encounters, mutual prejudices, and misunderstandings. There are also love stories within the stores’ scenario, as the novel *Chuan* (2015), by Luciana Czudnowsky¹.

The literary relationships between Argentina and China began earlier, of course. But our founding intellectuals did not travel to the Far East. By the mid

¹ “China en la literatura Argentina actual”. *Perfil*, 20.03.2016. <https://www.perfil.com/noticias/cultura/china-en-la-literatura-argentina-actual-20160320-0003.phtml>

XIX Century, they went to Europe and to the United States of America, in search of models and ideas for the new Republic they intended to build and that was finally organized and relatively pacified in 1880's. About China, which certainly was not a Republic, they knew very little, and at the moment they were not interested in finding out more.

We'll have to wait for the travel chronicles written by Eduardo Wilde (1844-1913), a brilliant writer, politician and physician who visited the country in 1897. He was a curious man with a real eagerness to see and learn. Although he appreciated some aspects of ancient Chinese art, he didn't like at all the Empire social and political organization and he was highly critical of the extreme poverty of the lower classes, the subjection of women and what he called the "barbaric torture" of their bandaged feet. It is interesting to note that, somewhat prophetically, he also saw in China the seed of a great future renewal: "movements appear that indicate a new tendency destined to grow; its goal will be to bring China to the group of the most advanced nations...²"

The aesthetical perspective prevailed in later travelers during the first part of XX Century, as the Catholic and conservative writer Jorge Max Rohde (1892-1979). After the Revolution of 1949, Argentinian leftist poets and intellectuals also traveled to China invited by the Government; political changes were very important for them, but also it was the great Chinese literary tradition. Perhaps the most outstanding example is the poet Juan L. Ortiz (1896-1978), whose interest in Chinese culture was previous to his only travel in 1957. Ortiz found the landscape of the Yan-tsé River quite similar to that of his own native land, by the Paraná River, in our province of Entre Ríos (which means "Between Rivers"). China inspired part of his works. He had devotion for the ancient poet Li Po, he maintained correspondence with contemporary Chinese authors and translated lyrical pieces, having to work with another previous translations, as he did not know Mandarin. But undoubtedly he felt that he was part of the same poetic family, and that was enough for him and for the translated poets. The true Ortiz

² Cited by Axel Gasquet, *Oriente al Sur. El orientalismo literario argentino de Esteban Echeverría a Roberto Arlt*. Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2007, 191.

precursors –says the critic Álvaro Fernández Bravo³— should not be searched for in our Western traditions, but in China.

Many studies have already been written on Jorge Luis Borges links with philosophical and literary Chinese tradition, particularly with Zhuang Zi, frequently referred to in his essays and poems. The Taoist influence can be also traced in the works of the poet and novelist Leopoldo Marechal, of the same generation. He even wrote two Taoist tales and called them “Chinese apologues”; the hero is Zhuang Zi himself. In the same vein we can also consider Alberto Laiseca (1941-2016), an experimental novelist who wrote only one book of poetry entitled *Chinese Poems* (1987)

Now it is my turn. I am here for the first time, thrilled as if I were just a girl who is discovering a new world. I’m no longer a girl; an old girl, perhaps. But this China I’m walking on is really new for me. All I had was a turmoil of names, images, glimpses, dazzles, flashes, false remembrances, mixed up readings.

I open my memory’s magic box and I let its rusty treasures fly out: two or three dragons, Marco Polo’s millions, a butterfly that is perhaps a mirror of a myself, a painted umbrella, the Forbidden City I saw in Bertolucci’s movie, a manuscript made of undecipherable signs, a Mao collar and a wide sleeves robe, a flourished plum tree within a quiet garden, a ghost sitting on the garden’s bench, waiting for me to talk.

I let also fly the commonplaces, the other writer’s works, the inherited perceptions.

What will be China for me, from this very moment? The magic box remains open to receive my own Chinese poem, the one I’m just beginning to write.

³ Fernández Bravo, Álvaro. “Juan L. Ortiz y la poesía china: Un episodio de cosmopolitismo provinciano”. IV *Congreso Internacional Cuestiones Críticas*, Rosario, 30 de setiembre, 1 y 2 de octubre de 2015. http://www.celarg.org/int/arch_publici/fernandezbravocc2015.pdf