

SHOT THROUGH
Erika Tan 2008

script



I am going to China.

I will walk across the Luhu Bridge spanning the Sham Chun River between Hong Kong and China.

After having been in China for a while, I will walk across the Luhu Bridge spanning the Sham Chun River between China and Hong Kong.

Five variables:

- Luhu Bridge
- Sham Chun River
- Hong Kong
- China
- peaked cloth caps

Consider other possible permutations.

Susan Sontag, Project for a Trip to China in I, Etcetera, 1972



Will this trip appease a longing?

Q. [stalling for time] The longing to go to China, you mean?

A. Any longing.

Yes.

Archaeology of longings.

But it's my whole life!

Susan Sontag, Project for a Trip to China in I, Etcetera, 1972



In our dream world, is not China precisely this privileged *site of space*? In our traditional imagery, the Chinese culture is the most meticulous, the most rigidly ordered, the one most deaf to temporal events, most attached to the pure delineation of space; we think of it as a civilization of dikes and dams beneath the eternal face of the sky; we see it, spread and frozen, over the entire surface of a continent surrounded by walls. Even its writing does not reproduce the fugitive flight of the voice in horizontal lines; it erects the motionless and still - recognizable images of things themselves in vertical columns. So much so that the Chinese encyclopedia quoted by Borges, and the taxonomy it proposes, lead to a kind of thought without space, to words and categories that lack all life and place, but are rooted in a ceremonial space, overburdened with complex figures, with tangled paths, strange places, secret passages, and unexpected communications. There would appear to be, then, at the other extremity of the earth we inhabit, a culture entirely devoted to the ordering of space, but one that does not distribute the multiplicity of existing things into any of the categories that make it possible for us to name, speak, and think.

Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, 1973



... the Chinese artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions... The actors openly choose those positions which will best show them off to the audience, just as if they were acrobats. A further means is that the artist observes himself... The audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on... The performer portrays incidents of utmost passion, but without his delivery becoming heated. At those points where the character portrayed is deeply excited the performer takes a lock of hair between his lips and chews it. But this is like a ritual, there is nothing eruptive about it. It is quite clearly somebody else's repetition of the incident: a representation, even though an artistic one... And so lack of control is decorously expressed...



China seems to withhold the meaning [sought by the visitor], not because China has something to hide but, more subversively, because (in very un-Confucian style) China dismantles the constitution of concepts, themes, and names ... It is the end of hermeneutics...

Julia Kristeva as quoted in Barthes, "alors, la Chine?" (le monde, May 24, 1974), in Barthes Euvres completes



I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence-to me the Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation-whose invented interplay- allows me to 'entertain' the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own.

Roland Barthes, "Faraway", Empire of Signs, 1982



Leaving aside its ancient palaces, its posters, its child ballets and its May Day parade, China is not colorful. The countryside is flat... no historical object interrupts it (no steeples, no manor houses)... No exoticism...

Julia Kristeva as quoted in Barthes, "alors, la Chine?" (le monde, may 24, 1974), in Barthes Euvres completes



Not only my father and mother but Richard and Pat Nixon have been to China before me. Not to mention Marco Polo, Matteo Ricci, the Lumiere brothers (or at least one of them), Teilhard de Chardin, Pearl Buck, Paul Claudel, and Norman Bethune. Henry Luce was born there. Everyone dreams of returning.

Susan Sontag, Project for a Trip to China in I, Etcetera, 1972



One certainty: China inspired the first lie I remember telling. Entering the first grade, I told my classmates that I was born in China. I think they were impressed.

I know that I wasn't born in China.

The four causes of my wanting to go to China:
material
formal
efficient
final

The oldest country in the world: it requires years of arduous study to learn its language. The country of science fiction, where everyone speaks with the same voice. Maotsetungized.

Whose voice is the voice of the person who wants to go to China?
A child's voice. Less than six years old.

Is going to China like going to the moon?
I'll tell you when I get back.

Susan Sontag, Project for a Trip to China in I, Etcetera, 1972



Can it be that the Chinese language preserves, thanks to its tones, a pre-syntactic, pre-symbolic register (for sign and syntax are concomitant), a pre-Oedipal register (even if it is clear that the full realization of the tonal system must await syntax, just as with the phonological system of French)? The same question arises regarding writing. Originally at least partly imagistic, but more and more stylized, abstract, and ideogrammatic, writing retains its evocative visual character (by resemblance with the object or the objects that underlie an idea) and its gestural character (to write in Chinese one must have not only memory for meanings but also a memory of movements). Can these visual and gestural components be considered as deriving from more archaic layers than those of meaning and signification (in as much as these latter are logical and syntactic abstractions)...

Julia Kristeva: Des Chinoises. 1974



I shall cross the Sham Chun bridge both ways.
And after that? No one is surprised. Then comes literature.
-The impatience of knowing - Self –mastery - Impatience in self-
mastery

I would gladly consent to being silent. But then, alas, I'm unlikely to know anything. To renounce literature, I would have to be really sure that I could know. A certainly that would crassly prove my ignorance.

Literature, then. Literature before and after, if need be. Which does not release m from the demands of tact and humility required for this over determined trip. I am afraid of betraying so many contradictory claims.

The only solution: both to know and not to know. Literature and not literature, using the same verbal gestures.

Among the so-called romantics of the last century, a trip almost always resulted in the production of a book. One travelled to Rome, Athens, Jerusalem- and beyond – in order to write about it.

Perhaps I will write the book about my trip to China before I go.

Susan Sontag, Project for a Trip to China in I, Etcetera, 1972



In classical China, just as the orientation of a map is established from within the map -north at the bottom of the frame, east at the left for a virtual observer, that is, as if the unfolding of the represented space came *from behind the map*, from a potential point both *in front of* and *within* the representation (and not like a specular projection) - so the vertical columns of writing would function, in our view, backwards, going from right to left, as if they were parallel rings in which air circulates and resounds. A Chinese classical book was not a 'book', but rather, by its framing and even by its binding, a series of perspectives, a striation of fields, of cascades, with sub-fields and sliding transitions in anticipation of an always deferred return.



Within the universality of Occidental *ratio* there is to be found the dividing line that is the Orient: the Orient that one imagines to be the origin, the vertiginous point at which nostalgia and the promises of return originate; the Orient that is presented to the expansionist rationality of the Occident but that remains eternally inaccessible because it always remains the limit.

Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, 1973

Credits:

Susan Sontag: I, Etcetera

Michael Foucault: The Order Of Things

Jacques Derrida: Of Grammatology

Roland Barthes: The Empire Of Signs And Alors La Chine?

Julia Kristeva: Des Chinoises

Brecht: On Theatre

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