

#13

APPROPRIATIONS OF CHINESE CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AMERICAN LITERATURE: A CONTRIBUTION TO A TENTATIVE MAP BASED ON THE WORKS OF CÉSAR AIRA, BERNARDO CARVALHO AND SIU KAM WEN

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Abstract || This article examines contemporary networks of readings between China and South American literature. Through works by César Aira, Bernardo Carvalho and Siu Kam Wen, it explores new configurations of comparative and world literature and different circuits of symbolic transference. Translation and stereotype are central categories to understand this zone of literary intersection.

Keywords || Comparative Literature | World Literature | China and Latin America | Translation | Stereotype

0. Introduction

This article has its starting point in the crisis of area studies, which meant the flourishing of Latin Americanism and the restructuring of the boundaries of Comparative Literature flourished in the face of the strengthening of World Literature studies. The organisation of the field of literary studies is subject to change and in the last few years it has undergone revisions which call into question its organisation (Apter, 2006; Spivak, 2005), jurisdiction (Bhabha, 2013: 71-78), dimension (Damrosch, 2008) and composition (Moretti, 2000, 2005; Trigo, 2012).

The rise in interest, partly by new generations of students, readers and critics exposed to cultural globalisation, to understand beyond established canons, has also contributed to the growth and transformation of Comparative Literature. In line with some of these revisions, I am interested in exploring interactions between Latin American literature and the Asian world, of an extensive history although it perhaps insufficiently reviewed by critics. I plan to explore discussions around the viability and scope of “areas” and “national literatures”, in order to formulate a tentative map of literary relations between some Latin American authors and Chinese culture in contemporary times. This map will try to explore non-Eurocentric networks which cross through paths different to the concentric paths which have their centres set in Europe, like those described by Moretti (2000) and Casanova (2001), and those criticised by Kristal (2002) and Montaldo (2010), among others.

Literary flows between Latin America and China suggests a path that, although never completely out of the reach of Atlantic intervention, highlights several intersecting paths which bring two symbolic worlds, rarely studied together, into contact. If the presence of China as an economic partner of Latin America is inevitable nowadays, the flow of symbolic capital between both universes deserves extra attention. In this article I will attempt to examine the position of Chinese culture in some contemporary works of Latin American literature. I will focus on two issues: firstly, a typology of the styles of literary approach between South America and China and, secondly, the economies of the stereotype at work in this exchange. In the first case, I will focus on the three authors and, in the second; I will concentrate on the two novels by César Aira.

The article attempts to develop this kind of connections on works of several contemporary South American authors who have shown an interest in the Chinese culture or have visited Chinese themes

in their texts. The advances of Latin American literature in World Literature (Casanova; De Ferrari; Sánchez Prado) have usually held the Latin American-Europe axis as one of its characteristic junctures, in order to identify and explore links between, for example, Europeans and Latin American avant-gardes. This essay proposes a different route. It starts from representations of Chinese culture in contemporary South American literature, focusing on works by three authors: César Aira, from Argentina, Bernardo Carvalho, from Brazil, and Siu Kam Wen, from Peru. The article also discusses the growing interest in the problems of World Literature which have contributed to the restructuring of literary studies and in particular of Comparative Literature, historically linked around national European literatures. Although the North American academy—where comparative Asian studies and its criticism present the most significant works from this emerging field—is one of the most dynamic spaces in this up-and-coming approach, my interest is directed towards cases of literary works published in South America, more specifically in Argentina, Brazil and Peru. These works have shown Chinese images and parallels, fulfilling a symbolic exchange with the Chinese culture in different ways. This approach allows us to think of a South-South dialogue that has yet to be studied in a systematic way.¹

Studies of Latin American and Asian literature have scarcely been undertaken, even though the presence of Asia in Latin American culture is nothing new. From the works of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento to those of Octavio Paz, from Pablo Neruda to Julián del Casal, including José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, Enrique Gómez Carrillo, Rubén Darío, Rubén Darío or Jorge Luis Borges, we see that the Asian world exerts a powerful attraction as the subject of symbolic representation in the context of the successive (and fluctuating) cosmopolitan waves of Latin American culture (Aguilar, 2009; Altamirano; Cristoff; Hagimoto; Lopes; Santiago; Siskind). China is a literary subject in texts by Bernardo Kordon, María Rosa Oliver, Lygia Fagundes Telles, Juan L. Ortiz and Ricardo Piglia amongst other authors.² Japan has an extensive literary presence in works which span from those of Mario Bellatin to those of José Watanabe, to name but a few. In this article, I propose a tentative tree diagram (or map), in order to use one of the models by Franco Moretti (2005). This will not be completely without a commentary on the text or close reading, considering that my object will be Latin American texts which visit the symbolic Chinese world. Likewise this article seeks to question the type of connections that exist between South American literature and the Chinese world, based on the classifications of different types of literary relationships, which are recognisable between both symbolic worlds in the cases under examination.

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1 | As Rosario Hubert points out, access to Asian literature for Spanish readers was possible through indirect translations into European languages, more specifically English, German or French (Hubert, 2014a). However, in recent years, translations from Chinese into Spanish have begun to appear without this middle stage. This is the case of Miguel Ángel Petrecca (*Un país mental. Cien poetas chinos contemporáneos*; Buenos Aires: Gog y magog, 2011; Petrecca is also in the process of compiling another anthology of contemporary Chinese writers), the Argentine editorial Bajolaluna and translations by Ana Kazumi Stahl, all from Argentina, as well as the editions and translations of Chinese poetry by Chilean Fernando Pérez Villalón.

2 | Ricardo Piglia recently announced the publication of his journal *Diario de viaje a China*, written in 1973, which recounts his travels in China. Sections of his journal were published in the cultural supplement of the newspaper *El País* in 2012. It can be accessed at <http://cultura.elpais.com/cultura/2012/05/02/actualidad/1335952444_526104.html>.

From a methodological point of view, this article maintains a connection with one of the strategies, suggested by Moretti and Damrosch, as a heuristic model for World Literature studies, which Moretti terms “distant reading” and Damrosch “mode of reading”. As Moretti indicated, “la literatura mundial no es un objeto, sino un problema” (“world literature is not an object, but a problem”) (Moretti, 2000: 149). This method has been received with indifference by specialists (Beecroft, 2015; Kristal, 2002; Montaldo, 2010; Spivak, 2005), but given that World Literature studies in their contemporary form are still in their initial stages (of uncertain development), it is valid to endorse some of their principles, in order, at the very least, to begin tackling certain problems that world literature pose, in this case, the interaction between Latin American literature and Chinese culture.

The same history of the areas’ formation during the Cold War, as noted by Jean Franco (2002), reveals their inherent inevitability, and allows us to consider the continuity and structure of disciplinary niches, set under a geopolitical umbrella in irreversible change. In this respect, it is important to consider the consolidation of structures such as “Caribbean literature”, “literature from Rio de la Plata” or “Andean literature”, which divide and affect the archive of “Latin American literature” internally. However, even these niches do not remain intact. For example, the category of “literature from the Southern Cone”, seems to have replaced the category “from Rio de la Plata” which was valid for some years (Molina); postcolonial literature comprises literature from the Caribbean, but principally that of the non-Hispanic Caribbean. The Caribbean itself can be considered a liminal zone of Latin America, capable of challenging its jurisdiction.

As De Ferrari observes, languages retain a capacity to interact which seems to survive the decline of areas and nations as conceptual units. Languages still retain the capacity to form symbolic, long-lasting communities (2012: 21). In this respect, the presence of Latin American writers in the United States and in Europe, particularly in Spain, brings new problems when reconsidering the sovereignty of Latin American literature outside the area, introducing elements which challenge its structure beyond established territories. This even includes one of the authors discussed in this work, Siu Kam Wen, who was born in the south of China and has been living for almost thirty years in Hawaii, although he publishes his books in Spanish in Peru and in Spain, and locates the plots of his novels in Peru, where he lived, studied and where his books are read.

This article will concentrate on two central axes: firstly, to establish three types of relationship between China and contemporary Latin American literature and, secondly, the use and positions of the stereotype as a fuller representation than is usually attributed to

this type of descriptive marker. Along with the importance attributed to movement in World Literature studies (Damrosch, 2011), the stereotype holds a distinct and migrant set of rules, due to its repetitive economy. The recurring variation of the stereotype will allow us to recover and revise fixed representations of identity. In this way, the Asian component will help in re-reading both of oriental images in Latin American literature and the division that the Chinese component interposes in representations of South American identities.

Let's take a closer look at these works, from which I hope to articulate some theories about the symbolic connection between China and Latin America.

1. Three Literary Approaches to Chinese Culture from South America

As anticipated, my work centres on three authors and four books. César Aira (Coronel Pringles, Buenos Aires, 1949) is a prolific Argentine novelist, having authored more than eighty books, successful both among readers as among academic critics (Contreras, 2002; Hoyos; Montaldo, 1998; Molina). In his vast literary production there is an interest in China and the Orient, which he has visited in some of his works.³ I will concentrate on two works, *Una novela china* (1987) and *El mármol* (2011), which show different perspectives and two historical representations of the Chinese world. The first narrates the history of Lu Hsin, an inhabitant of the Hosa region in the Green Mountains. His life highlights China during the Cultural Revolution and the throes of Maoism. Although it is a novel with few historical references, the text does refer to the political context, the ideological control of the party and the Cultural Revolution. The second novel, *El mármol*, takes place in the suburb of Flores, where Aira usually sets his stories, and revolves around a Chinese supermarket as the many that have appeared in the city of Buenos Aires in recent years.

The second author is Bernardo Carvalho (Rio de Janeiro, 1960), who is also a prolific author and whose productivity, like Aira's, shares success in sales and interest of critics, especially his first novels. Carvalho last three novels contain references to Eastern Asia: *Mongólia* (2003), *O Sol se põe em São Paulo* (2007) and *Reprodução* (2013). The first takes place in Mongolia, even though the storyline begins in Beijing; the second talks about Nikkei Brazilian culture and takes place partially in Japan; and the last novel, *Reprodução*, which we discuss in this article, centres around the story of an unemployed financial agent from Rio de Janeiro who learns Chinese language (we imagine he learns Cantonese given the geographical origin of his teacher), because he considers it to be the language of the future. The main character prepares to travel to Shanghai when

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3 | As Sandra Contreras observes (2007), it is possible to divide the extensive amount of novels by Cesar Aira into subsets. In the quoted article, she worked with "Panamanian Trilogy," an Asian body of work which would include *El volante* (1992), *Haikus* (2000) and *El pequeño monje budista* (2005), as well as the novels selected in this work.

something happens at the airport in Rio de Janeiro and the trip is interrupted. From this event, it spirals a discourse full of references to the Chinese imaginary in the contemporary context. Amongst readings of Carvalho's work, we should note those of Erber (2013) and Süssekind (2013).

Lastly, there is Siu Kam Wen (Zhongshan, Guandong, China, 1951), who from the age of eight to the age of thirty-four lived in Peru, before he immigrated to Hawaii, where he now lives. His first published book *El tramo final* (1986), which is discussed in this essay, was followed by *La primera espada del imperio* (1988), *Viaje a Ithaca* (2004), *La vida no es una tómbola* (2008) and *El furor de mis ardores* (2010). Critics have been interested in his contribution to the rethinking of Chinese-Peruvian identity (Lee-DiStefano, 2008; López-Calvo, 2008; Quaglia, 2012) in a country that contains one of the largest Chinese communities in the region. The short stories gathered in the book talk of a community with a divided identity, Peruvian and Chinese, and the tensions that stem from the coexistence of different and neighbouring traditions.

In chronological terms, two texts were published in 1986 and 1987—*El tramo final* and *Una novela china*—and two in 2011 and 2013—*El mármol* and *Reprodução*, and refer respectively to China before and since the capitalist modernisation.

1.1. First Model: Exoticising Imaginary

Following the formats of Moretti in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, I intend to map the literary relationship between South America and China in three tentative models. The first model, which I term “exoticising imaginary”, has become, since Marco Polo, an established model in the representation of Chinese culture in the Western world (Said) and in Latin America. Franco Moretti states that distance is not only an obstacle in accessing World Literature, but rather it can also be a specific form of knowledge (Moretti, 2005). The knowledge that South American literature brings to the Chinese culture is of an imaginary type and this will be the principal characteristic of the texts included in this first typology. The work of Aira has been recognised for its imaginary composition and his capacity to invent stories, which is the preferred approach used by the writer in all his literary works (Contreras, 2002; Montaldo, 1998). Distance functions as a stimulus for creativity and make-believe.

A similar method can be seen in *Reprodução*, by Bernardo Carvalho. The “student of Chinese”, the main character of the novel who is about to travel to Shanghai, has no genuine knowledge of China. Not even of the Chinese language, which “ele apenas imagina, porque é impossível aprendê-la” (2013: 9) and which functions as the main

concept of the plot, offers an accessible knowledge. Untranslatable contents abound. The character possesses a superficial knowledge of the world, obtained from Internet blogs and magazine articles, even though curiosity for transnational and global settings can be taken as a feature of modern times (Erber, 2013).

The main characters' contact with China takes place through the Chinese teacher whom he meets when he decides to study "the language of the future." The two meet at the airport in the check-in queue, when they are about to travel to China. The police detain them at the same time. The limited bond between both main characters is the only basis from which the "student of Chinese" is able to provide all types of observations and clichés about contemporary China. From Chinese language as the "language of the future", as the first part of the novel is entitled, to the threat of gay couples adopting Chinese babies, thus not reproducing and contributing indirectly to the overpopulation of and presence of Chinese people in the world. The text covers common places and racist stereotypes, but in contrast to Aira, who values the exotic as an imaginary device with which to base his fantasies—according to what is read in his Chinese stories—, in *Reprodução* racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic prejudices and the proliferation of right-wing vulgar opinions feature as degrading evidence of the harmful effects of virtual globalisation. The exotic operates therefore in equal yet opposing directions in the work of both authors.

In interviews (Aira, 2009), Aira has defended the use of fantasy and non-testimonial fiction as a literary device, as well as in his texts on literature, including the essay "Exotismo" (1993) which analyses this position in greater detail. When referring to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, he states that:

El género exótico proviene entonces de esta colaboración entre ficción y realidad, bajo el signo de la inversión: para que la realidad revele lo real, debe hacerse ficción. La inversión se tematiza naturalmente, y el persa en Francia no tarda en volverse francés en Persia. El "extranjero" se hace "viajero". (1993: 78)

In his essay, Aira defends the use of the imaginary as a device for literary knowledge and production, which might be thought of in relation to *Una novela china*. The novel, which takes place entirely in China, includes numerous references to Chinese culture during the Cultural Revolution (and previous to that), even though the source of these references always remains hidden. Painting, customs, art, calligraphy, music, and hydraulics (amongst other "Chinese" knowledge) refer to China that allow us to consider the method defined by Rosario Hubert as "fictional epistemologies of China" (Hubert, 2014b) when referring to the work of Jorge Luis Borges,

among other authors who have written fictional sinologies. The main character of the novel, Lu Hsin, may be seen as an alter ego of author Lu Xun (1881-1936), even though he does not correspond to the time of Aira's text, had links with the Communist Party and was recognized by the regime during the first years of the Revolution.

Borges is also the author of different "Chinese fictions" of which the best known is "The Garden of Forking Paths" included in his *Ficciones* (1944). Although Borges never travelled to China and did not know the language, references to Chinese culture and Oriental literature abound in his work, especially to *One Thousand and One Nights*. In "Exotismo", Aira quotes and criticizes the well-known observation by Borges in "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" (1953 [1962]) about the lack of camels in the Quran (implying the lack of stereotypes). As Sandra Contreras has pointed out (2002), Aira presents a strategic defence for stereotypes and exoticism (which he uses) as tools of literary creativity while not making a moral judgement on the problem of the authenticity of symbolic representations. In the final instance, authenticity is irrelevant to fantasy.

In the case of *El tramo final*, the relationship between the narrative and the authors' own experience affects the fictional or imaginary condition in the stories. The author's link with Chinese culture, in contrast to that of Aira's and Carvalho's, is of a different type, as he belongs to that community, having been born and having lived in China from the age of eight and having been part of the Chinese community in Peru. In this way, his stories tell the history of migration, exclusion, assimilation and tensions between the Chinese community and the Peruvian world. Like a large number of Chinese immigrants in South America, the Chinese-Peruvian community originates from the south of China and Cantonese expressions prevail, as do historical references to wars and customs of that region. The two characters in *Reprodução* also come from the south of China, as mentioned previously. In the case of Aira's texts, references are more imprecise, but as in Argentina, immigration from the South dominates.

Although the work of Siu Kam Wen is totally fictional, its relationship with the exoticising imaginary is more indirect than in the two other authors mentioned. His work therefore does not fit into this first typology in the same conditions as the other two novels, not because of lack of exoticisation, which without doubt can be seen in the literary register, but rather because it has a more "ethnographic" and testimonial value. Having said that, it is worth highlighting that in *El tramo final* and other works by the author, Chinese stereotypes are plentiful.

1.2. Second model: Hybrid Approach

The second approach can be defined as a hybrid approach, in which direct contact with the Chinese world combines with fiction and a transfer of feelings between South America and China. We can term it a “literary hybrid approach”. Bernardo Carvalho travelled to China to write *Mongólia* thanks to a scholarship from the Fundación Oriente de Lisboa, awarded together with the publishing houses Companhia das Letras in São Paulo and Cotovia in Lisbon (Alves).⁴

The novel takes place partially in Beijing, where the narrator, a retired Brazilian diplomat, recalls his relationship with a Brazilian photographer lost in Mongolia, whose story he tries in vain to reconstruct. To a certain point, the text repeats the format of the novel which brought Carvalho success, *Nueve noches* (2002), in which he tells of the experience and death of the North American anthropologist Buell Quain, a friend of Lévi-Strauss and student of Ruth Benedict, among the Krahô Indians in the Brazilian desert. Although in *Mongólia* there is contact with the Mongolian world, it is about a opaque, impenetrable culture, which he can only speculate on. In *Reprodução*, the efforts of the characters to understand cultures with which they try to relate also shares this deferred and refractory. Distance and lack of transparency, however, function as stimulus for fiction.

As Flora Süssekind observes, Carvalho’s novel seems to be part of a wave of contemporary Brazilian works in which whispering and orality invade enunciation, making it difficult to know whether the narration actually happened or whether it belongs to the characters’ dreams and the anonymous voices that saturate the story (Süssekind, 2013). The book is set in the airport of Rio de Janeiro just before a journey, another characteristic of this second hybrid literary model. In contrast to the more stable and sedentary first model, the interaction partakes of the global, symbolic economy of movements and continual mobility. Here “non-places” (like airports, hotels or transitory dwellings), migration, and mobility abound.

Several stories by Siu Kam Wen can be classified according to these set features. The nomadic trait of the Chinese community and the dispersion which drove a large percentage of the community to abandon Peru, due to the economic crisis of the 1980’s, in addition to the threat of Communism, is also visible in the stories and fictional tales of the Chinese-Peruvian author. The narrator of *El tramo final* states that “En aquella época muchos de los residentes chinos habían emigrado a los Estados Unidos, a Australia y a Centroamérica, o se habían vuelto a Hong Kong y a Macao, pues corría el rumor de que el país se iba a convertir en un Estado comunista” (2013: 47).

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4 | The position of Brazilian literature today is of major integration into the global publishing market, similar to other Latin American literatures. The publishing house La Editora Companhia das Letras paid Carvalho to include “Amores Expressos” in his collection, and this allowed him to write *O filho da mãe* and to travel to St Petersburg to complete it. The novel, which narrates episodes of the war in Chechnya and its effects in Russia, also touches on the Muslim and Asian worlds in the Caucasus. The collection *Amores expressos* brings together works by contemporary Brazilian authors who narrate love stories in non-Brazilian towns and cities (Molina, 2013: 40). Carvalho also visited the native Krahô community in the northeast of Brazil where he wrote *Nueve noches*. It is worth mentioning that the integration of Brazilian literature into the global market leaves significant marks in literature production. Editorial Companhia das Letras has encouraged the overproduction of several authors and this may affect the quality of the texts published. Critics have received Carvalho’s latest books with declining enthusiasm.

Both authors, Carvalho and Siu, have been affected by migration and globalisation, although in different ways. Carvalho worked as a journalist and was the correspondent for *Folha de São Paulo* in New York and Paris. Because of the size and dynamism of the Brazilian editorial market, as he indicated, he was sent on trips which on various occasions fuelled his stories. Siu Kam Wen lives in Hawaii, but travels to Peru when his books are published and he is also a “global” author and migrant, even since the publication of his first book, when he was immigrating to Hawaii. This is noted in the introduction to *El tramo final* (2013: 17).

Lastly, in the list of characteristics for the literary hybrid approach it is appropriate to mention the linguistic component as the basis of the symbolic mediation. Both Siu and Carvalho include phrases or Chinese expressions in their texts, so that Spanish language coexists with Chinese in the texts. Siu includes mixed-race expressions such as “Chicuchei”, which he defines as “palabra híbrida, resultante de la combinación de la voz castellana ‘chico’ y de la voz cantonesa ‘chei’, que significa exactamente lo mismo que la primera” (2013: 53).

There also exists an additional means of linguistic mediation, that of translation, which is important to consider together within the model of the hybrid approach. The three authors undertook translation at some point in their career. Both Carvalho and Aira translated from European languages to Portuguese and Spanish, respectively. Carvalho has translated the work of Juan José Saer, Ian McEwan and other renowned authors. Aira has translated works by Antonie de Saint Exupéry, Jan Potocki, Franz Kafka, Jane Austen, Stephen King, as well as best-selling works. It is fitting to mention his translation of *The Location of Culture* by Homi Bhabha, which we will discuss in the final part of this article (Bhabha, 2002). Siu Kam Wen has not acted as professional translation but his writing can be considered a form of translation. In a certain sense, works of Aira and Carvalho also act like a translation in their approach to the Chinese world, although they are not an interlingual translation, given that they do not know the language, but rather because of the interpretation of the fiction itself as a translation.

Siu mentions the difficulty of starting to write in Spanish due to the lack of easily accessible Chinese-Spanish dictionaries; he also mentions a “Filipino”-Chinese dictionary (actually a Spanish-Chinese dictionary, a legacy from the Spanish colonial experience in the Philippines), which he used to help him when he started to write (2013: 14). Translation therefore operates as practice and training in the writing profession. The author notes that “me puse a traducir poemas y los clásicos chinos al español, tratando de aprender la lengua de mi país adoptivo” (2013: 9).

1.3. Third Model: A Look from the Inside

The third model engages more deeply with the Chinese universe and it can be likened to having the key to the door of the community and taking a look inside. The three authors discussed in this article try to represent the Chinese world, even though they employ different means and obtain dissimilar results. Siu Kam Wen gets the furthest in this endeavour, due to his being a member of the Chinese-Peruvian community. His stories reveal the practices and uses, as well as the segregations, poverty and exploitation affecting the Chinese people in Peru (and also in China). In this respect, the narrator operates as a trafficker who extracts and brings to his stories data, practices, traditions and customs from the closed and opaque sphere of the Chinese-Peruvian community to the sphere of Peruvian literature in Spanish, rendering visible something which otherwise would remain unknown to Spanish-speaking readers. The familiar, cultural and social codes, as well as the successful and unsuccessful processes of assimilation of the immigrants in the new country, are the subject of his narrative.

As stated at the beginning, *Una novela china* does not belong to this model because it is pure fantasy. However, we can say that in *El mármol*, César Aira is partly fed by experience, given that his novel takes place in the suburb of Flores where the writer lives and where several of his stories take place. The Chinese supermarket has become an Argentine institution (comparable to Arab markets in France), and navigating its aisles, shelves and goods constitutes a common experience for the inhabitants of Buenos Aires, which inspires the story of the novel. As Héctor Hoyos has observed, in his Latin American versions, the supermarket allows us to consider how the world and its inhabitants are shown as consumers (Hoyos, 2015). However, knowledge of the Chinese world is superficial and to a certain degree irrelevant to Aira's poetics. We could almost say that ignorance of Chinese culture is a constructive principle of *El mármol*, unlike in *Una novela china* where references to Chinese art, history and culture still fulfil a function.⁵

Carvalho's novel remains far from this paradigm and functions as a list of common places about the Chinese culture in contemporary times. Like any stereotype, as we will see in the following section, variations and repetitions alternate. Over the last centuries, the marginal position of China in the Western imaginary (although China occupied a very different position in some moments of her long history) has shifted in a short space of time towards a new position of centrality, as a country of the future and source of appealing wealth for people such as the main character of the novel, an unemployed agent in the financial market (and student of Chinese).

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5 | Aira quotes the work of Flaubert in "Exotismo" as an example of a perspective on the nation itself, comparable to that of Mário de Andrade. The *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* could be used alongside Carvalho's novel and is useful when thinking about exoticism as a device in literary writing.

2. The Economy of Stereotypes

There is a strong statement at the beginning of *El mármol* that can serve as starting point to examine the problem of the stereotype: “Un hombre siempre representa a su nación, quiera o no quiera” (Aira, 2012:14). It is a provocative statement and a challenge to the common places of the celebratory multiculturalism of globalisation. As we know, world literature studies are permeated by a anti-nationalistic agenda (Apter, 2006) which nonetheless can be revised. Aira’s intervention can also serve to develop the problem of the stereotype—in connection to Chinese stereotypes in *El mármol* and *Una novela china*—in addition to analyse the location of Aira’s work in relation to globalisation and world literature.

I have already mentioned that in the essay “Exotismo”, Aira discusses the defense of universalism put forward by Borges in “The Chinese Writer and Tradition”. Aira argues that nationality is not a telluric, essential value, but rather a repetitive and dependant practice, capable of producing a repetition of the world from literature: “Yo creo que en algún punto del camino hemos descubierto que un escritor solo puede ser francés o persa o argentino, nunca Hombre” (Aira, 1993:76)—, opposing both the abstract universalism of Borges (“our tradition is all of Western culture”, Borges 1974: 184) and the humanist cosmopolitanism of some of the contemporary Argentine writers—Saer, Piglia—, as Sandra Contreras has shown (2002: 73-85). Repetition (or *reproduction*, as in the title of Carvalho’s novel) is not an act of identical duplication but conversely, a heterological action with the potential to modify, associated with art and the creative capacity of literary productivity.

The representation of a nation of which the quote in *El mármol* talks about is another way of describing stereotypes—the treacherous Oriental, the hypersexual African, the Nazi German, the stubborn American, the bad-tempered Argentine, the cheerful Brazilian or the miserly Jew—although for Aira there is no fixed representation. Furthermore, because of their repetition, stereotypes are updated and refreshed in each literary representation. Literature repeats, reproduces, and multiplies, and thus disturbs the fixity of the stereotype instead of confirming and maintaining it. For this reason, in “Exotismo”, Aira defends a type of productive exoticism, unconnected from the search for authenticity (stereotypes are not authentic, and for this they become useful to Aira).

Referring to *Macunaíma* by Mário de Andrade, a work that actively discusses stereotypes about Brazilians (the lazy, cunning Brazilian, etc.), Aira says:

El americano no necesita viajar tanto como el europeo; en sus países

inconexos, a medio hacer, encuentra mitades exóticas mirando por la ventana. A ese otro país negativo dentro del suyo se le puede dar signo negativo (la barbarie, como en *Euclides* o en *Sarmiento*) o positivo (la selva edénica de *O Guarani*). Sea como sea, ese país otro se vuelve “otro” absoluto, literatura, como la infancia, o el amor. (1993: 78)

Even when repeated, Chinese stereotypes also vary. Like any stereotype, they feed from images coded in culture. In *Una novela china*, Lu Hsing incurs in stereotypical behaviour which the West associates with Chinese culture: their impeccable politeness, their calmness, their patience and wisdom, coexist with others, as “the ridiculous counter-revolutionary” (“el ridículo contrarrevolucionario”) (2005: 29), different inferences of the ideological vigilance during the Cultural Revolution and persecution of revisionists (2005: 97) by the Chinese Communist Party, still vivid in the 1980’s when the novel was published. It also appears the image of the Oriental (or of the Chinese, which in this case the same) of dubious sexuality. At various moments in the novel, there are hints to homosexuality, between Lu Hsin’s friends (Hua, 2005: 24, 67) and about Lu Hsin himself: “Como todo hombre de espíritu mandarín, Lu había acariciado la idea de la sodomía, pero sin tomarla nunca en serio” (2005: 137).

If we compare the creation of the characters in *Una novela china* with those in *El mármol* we can again recognise the mixed components of the stereotype that Homi Bhabha analysed and Aira translated. In the essay “La otra pregunta. El estereotipo, la discriminación y el discurso del colonialismo” (“The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism”) Bhabha states that “the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive, and demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives but that we change the object of analysis itself” (1994: 70). Bhabha examined the process of creation of subjectivity in which the national sign connects with the ambivalent value of the stereotype. As Ruth Amossy and Therese Heidingsfeld observe, similarly to Bhabha, the stereotype acts in a diverse temporality in which repetition and difference are inseparable (1984: 692). Even though the stereotype suggests stability, it allows for changing representations to be reconstructed and gives access to the perceptions of the subjects of each stereotype but also of those who perceive them. Thus, the stereotype provides greater symbolic information about the addresser than about the addressee.

In *El mármol*, Chinese characters replicate and reproduce in order to show the richness and mobility of the stereotype, with several characteristic features being capable of mutating and remaining unchanged at the same time. “El cajero era un chino robusto y estólido. La tan mentada ‘cortesía china’ debe ser un mito, o la emplean solo entre ellos, porque entre nosotros exhiben una

apabullante falta de modales” (2012: 14) The novel, unapologetically politically incorrect, incurs all types of stereotypes, with far from any hint of political correctness: Jonathan, the Chinese colleague of the main character, is called “chinito”, is described as a speaker of an incorrect and incomprehensible language, as poor, childish, impolite, scrawny and backward. His description resembles that of the coolies of the massive migrations from China to the Americas at the end of the 19th century (Young, 2014).

As with any representation, however, there is replication (or reproduction) which always results in a difference. A character, who operates as double of Jonathan,

no solo hablaba buen castellano, armando las oraciones y escogiendo el vocabulario, sino que además se movía y gesticulaba como un señorito, y estaba vestido como un dandi: ropa de marca a la última moda, impecable, planchada, unos zapatos excelentes de cuero morado, que hacían contraste con los pobres pies desnudos de Jonathan en sus ojotas⁶ de goma. (2012: 78)

We can see how the stereotype, far from being rigid, fixed, repetitive, and subject to some type of freezing of identity, holds, in its reproduction, an enigmatic and dynamic element, which perhaps explains its capacity to survive and reappear, not always with the same features, but rather capable to vary and move. This does not mean that the rigidity and potential to make everything the same are not present, but rather that the fixedness and fantasy operate like concurrent characteristics of the stereotype (Bhabha, 2002: 102). Bhabha likens the stereotype to fetish, and from this I will make a final consideration.

My last observation in this respect stretches further these considerations about the complexity of the stereotype. *El mármol* tells of the misfortune of an unemployed, middle class man—like the main character in *Reprodução*—, carefree, who carries out anodyne tasks such as doing the daily shopping in the Chinese supermarket at the local street corner. As in *Una novela china* and *Reprodução*, China evokes notions of quantity and size for the narrators (and in the common places of the South American collective imagination), always a disproportionate number. It calls to mind frightening fantasies usually associated with the population of the Asian country. Nowadays it is the Chinese economic productivity, especially the industrial wealth from mass consumption, which is another characteristic which both confirms and alters the nature of the Chinese stereotype.

In the case of Aira, quantities are associated with the problem that Borges discussed in “La paradoja de Aquiles y la tortuga” (“Avatars of the tortoise”): quantity may become incommensurable by enormity and excess, but also, in the opposite sense, by its division into

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6 | The term “ojota” is used in Argentina as a synonym for a sandal generally made of plastic or another industrial material.

miniscule fragments subject to subsequent divisions. Thus, Lu Hsin, the main character in *Una novela china*, paints pictures which he sells at ridiculously low prices. The economic exchanges in the novel always involve minuscule numbers which problematize the very concept of economic value and exchange value. On receiving his change in the supermarket, the main character in *El mármol* is invited to choose Chinese goods, products of low quality, to cover the small sum that remains after having paid for her products.⁷

The insignificant amount of change is converted into a collection of “Chinese” goods that grow and function as fetishes, as condensations of the identity traits associated with contemporary industrial China. The objects both reinforce and deflect from the features of the stereotype. Amongst the trinkets that the narrator obtains as a result of using up the change, there are “pilas chinas, bastante sospechosas con sus paisajes pintados para mirar con lupa [...]. Las tomé, metiendo los dedos entre racimos de muñequitos, pastilleros de nacar, zapatos de muñeca, hojitas de afeitar y cápsulas de perfumes francese falsificados” (Aira, 2012: 18-19). They are clearly poor quality products, of tiny dimensions, which allude to the problem of quantity. Other objects, in addition to batteries, serve a purpose in the storyline of the novel: a shiny rubber eye (“la industria hoy, y sobre todo la china, hace masivamente objetos que incorporan mucha tecnología pero que no valen nada”, 20), a golden buckle, a small teaspoon and a camera the size of a dice (24).

Things, as indicated in the text, represent properties associated with the Chinese imaginary: smallness divided to infinity, dubious quality, industrially made, the quantity of which defies the very notion of economic value, reducing it (and for this reason multiplying it) until it almost disappears. The stability of the stereotype is thus affected, fragmented and disturbed, while its most common features are confirmed, however revealing new dimensions: the Chinese present-future in which we are, and of which the supermarket is a projection.

3. Concluding Remarks

Representations of China have abounded in contemporary South American literature and have appealed to different styles of storytelling that put an stress on notions such as exoticism, stereotype, Latin America and identity. The South American texts and authors discussed in this article have been interested in Chinese culture and have produced works which use different approaches to a distant and little known world. The present typology of approaches has attempted to identify different types of relationships, from a fictional connection based on exoticisation, which nonetheless generates fictions based on the impossibility of knowing, to a more realistic representation of

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7 | The problem of change when paying for shopping is a frequent dilemma for all economic transactions in Argentina and tends to surprise visitors who are not familiar with this situation. Chronic economic instability, inflation and a currency in a state of devaluation which has continued for almost fifty years through various governments, perhaps explains the circumstances recounted in the novel.

the Chinese-born population in South America.

In all these cases there operates a system that can be read as a translation with different degrees of faithfulness, sometimes populated with untranslatable phrases and words, but capable of inspiring fantastical stories. This is partly due to the lack of transparency of the Chinese significant. The presence of literary texts with Chinese characters and motifs reveals the proximity and growing visibility of the Asian diaspora in South America. China gets close to South America through the economic exchange that Aira and Carvalho's novels note, and through immigration to urban areas of Lima, Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. Traces of this process can be seen in the works of the authors mentioned in this article.

Stereotypes maintain an active relationship with identity, but it is not a relationship based on fixation and stable reproduction. In fact, due to its ability to reproduce itself, the stereotype allows for the exploration of temporary, diverse representations, because the established link between linguistic sign, the represented subject and the context in which it is articulated, reveals a temporariness which affect its fixedness to a stable and lasting sense. Repetition of the stereotype only highlights the contingency of any subjectivity and its potential for variation. In this way, in the South American orientalist imagination, China has been associated with an archaic temporality and a millenary civilization, but also with other historical configurations. *Una novela china* and *El tramo final*, while firmly set in the present, maintain a connection with the past. Contrarily, *El mármol* and *Reprodução* change the relationship of the Chinese stereotype with the past and reveal a clearer connection with both present and future ("La lengua del futuro", Carvalho). However, on revealing its iterative nature, the stereotype shows its temporary and crafted nature, as well as that of those who use it. Due to its proximity with fetish, the stereotype functions as a substitute and not only highlights the artificial condition of the subject that pretends to represent, but also that of those who articulate it to look at the world. Thus, the stories by Siu Kam Wen talk of Chinese in Peru as much as of Peruvians from Lima under the Chinese gaze: the stereotypes abound from both directions.

In spite of this, stereotypes fulfil a useful function in symbolic production. Although uncertain and unstable, identities formed partly with information provided by stereotypes, maintain a valid role in the equalizing nature of globalisation. An non-differentiated universe lacks the necessary boundaries needed to navigate the world, and stereotypes, while contingent, provide some signs. Even when we identify nationalities and citizenship as imaginary signs, they are necessary signs to survive the transit of migration and dislocation. In the same manner as nobody is willing to sacrifice their life in the

name of universal citizenship, no one can take advantage of it to tell of the impact of the human and economic fluxes that navigate and populate the contemporary world.

I have attempted to show how subject formations undergo a complex process, of high symbolic density, that can be studied and examined through a reading practice able to problematize established categories (identity, reproduction, world literature, globalisation, China, Latin America) starting from South American literary texts that cover symbolic formations associated with the Chinese imaginary. As with all exoticising itinerary, these works tell simultaneously of a foreign culture and also of one's own identity, seen from a remote perspective and, for this reason, revealing and capable of contributing to a better understanding of the relationships between China and the contemporary South American imagination.

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