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MONTT STRABUCCHI, MARÍA. *REPRESENTATIONS OF CHINA
IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE (1987-2016)*

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Representations of China in Latin American Literature (1987-2016) provides an interesting and refreshing look at the ways in which China, Chinese people, and Chinese culture have been depicted over a corpus of ten novels written by authors from Argentina, Mexico, Colombia and Uruguay. María Montt Strabucchi develops her analysis over three thematic chapters focusing on: 1) novels set in China; 2) Chinese presence through Chinatowns in Latin American capitals; and 3) novels depicting travels to China.

In her introduction, the author asserts that her book “focuses on how and why Latin American writers have represented ‘China’ in their texts” (9). This is a much welcome approach to Sino-Latin American relations as most of the past and current literature has dealt with these from economic, political, and historical perspectives. Granting the arts, especially through the literary text, a starring role when establishing further ties between Latin America and China is certainly a great contribution to the field of Latin American literary studies, and also to Global Studies as an emerging field that incorporates the arts and the humanities.

Chapter 1 studies novels set in imagined ‘Chinas’ in texts by Argentine novelists César Aira (b. 1949) and Alberto Laiseca (1941-2016), together with Mexican author Mario Bellatin (b. 1960). The core strength of this chapter lies on the fact that, to Montt Strabucchi, “the novels can thus be seen to engage with a Latin American public whose idea of China is influenced by Orientalism and Cold War discourses on China as despotic and distant, while simultaneously interrupting these discourses and prior representations of that country” (45). Such ambitious intent required a contextualized reading of the corpus selected. The ‘otherness’ offered by China, the Chinese and Chineseness unravels known oppositions between ‘East’ and ‘West’, which would also find a parallel in Latin America as the exotic, to a certain extent. By the end of the chapter readers are told that the novels studied act “as a ‘space of encounter’, allowing dialogue and finding through these discursively reinvented and destabilized ‘Chinas’, different ways to talk about contemporary power relations and forms of *strangeness* (90, my italics).

The problematization of the different ‘Chinas’ presented in Chapter 1 shows a more historiographic focus rather than a critical literary study of the selected novels —although this does not operate to the detriment of the volume as a whole. The book in general works well as an interdisciplinary study that approaches literary texts. In Montt Strabucchi’s perspective, “that which is fiction and that which is based on ‘real’ history remain difficult to distinguish as original historiographic sources are not quoted” (62). Even though the question posited is of a legitimate nature, the attempt at answering it is somewhat naïve from a Literary Studies point of view. The construction of fictitious texts as in *how* they are articulated or shaped is, to me, more important than historical verisimilitude. What is more, an analysis of why these depictions of China exists and what they symbolically mean within a Latin American context lacks nuanced development. There are lengthy reflections in this chapter about the reliability or unreliability of a given narrator through the use of figures such as ellipses or interpellations, among others (64) without delving deeper into what this implies/means/signals in the text analysed.

Chapter 2 illuminates readers on representations of Chineseness within a Latin American context through the locus of a *Chinatown*. Montt Strabucchi presents novels written by Argentinians Ariel Magnus (b. 1975) and César Aira. She adds Mexican Cristina Rivera Garza (b.1964), the first woman author in the cohort. Montt Strabucchi then proceeds to study articulations of Chinatown, or *barrio chino*, in both Buenos Aires and an implied Mexico City. There is a necessary, albeit briefly, discussion of the concept of ‘chino’ particularly in Argentina which introduces an image of China all too familiar for the implied reader of these novels: a middle-class Latin American readership who understand that China “manifests itself through cheap products” (111). This image highlights the relevance of trade between Latin America and China. This, additionally, deems relevance to the literary text as one which also artistically documents events and relationships which are economic, political and cultural. This very point makes Montt Strabucchi’s text worth of commendation, as it is still rather new to find criticism pertaining to the links between both China and Latin America from cultural standpoints, especially generated from Latin America.

Despite certain theoretical repetitions, Chapter 2 succeeds at identifying and exemplifying racial monolithic structures which are still pervasive in Latin America. The corpus selected here depict an idea of ‘China at home’ in Latin America and challenge “the myths of a ‘white’ Argentina and open [sic] up the meaning of a ‘Mestizo’ Mexico” (149). This is highly significant as these novels would defy the somewhat assumed invisibilization of the Chinese presence in Latin America and would aim at exposing issues of integration (or lack thereof) in both Argentina and Mexico’s capital cities.

Chapter 3 shifts to a cohort of novels that depict travel to contemporary China. Montt Strabucchi studied two novels by Colombian Santiago Gamboa (b.

1965); one by Mexican Ximena Sánchez Echenique (b. 1979) the youngest author selected and the only other woman apart from Rivera Garza studied in Chapter 2; and one last novel by Uruguayan Gabriel Peveroni (b. 1969). Still drawing strongly on Sara Ahmed —whose theories on strangeness are central throughout this book— Montt Strabucchi alerts the reader that the focus of Chapter 3 is to study the corpus selected through the lens of Ahmed’s “examination of migration and estrangement narratives” (162). Specifically, these novels’ portrayals of travels into Mainland China generate fruitful dialogue with Ahmed’s studies on the phenomenon of globalization —for example, a Latin American character who lives in Europe and travels to China to look for some information for his new book. These narratives challenge white-centred ‘travel writing’ in fiction, which is *per se* full of its own colonial stereotypes and expectations. Also, the idea of a Latin American subject, exotic as described by the grand narratives of the past, as someone who travels to the other side of the exotic, that one of the ‘far east’, provokes a displacement of meaning and also incorporate these Latin Americans within what is now commonly known as a “nomadic subject [who has] an ability to see the world that becomes the basis for a new global identity and humanity” (164).

In her commentary on Hubert Pöppel’s criticism of globalization, Montt Strabucchi draws on a fair and necessary point: “To write against Orientalism, [he] argues, is a way of criticizing the self-exoticization of Latin American magical realism, where the choice of an Oriental setting constitutes a critique of the legacy of the Boom and its excessive accentuation of Latin American specificity” (172). Thus, the reading of these ‘travel to China’ narratives also bear the sign of a distancing from the previous Latin American tradition, which, up to a certain extent, created both an image of contemporary Latin America and an expectation of Latin American literary aesthetics to resort to the exotic and the excessive.

Another relevant point in Chapter 3, is the idea of a (re)centering of a Latin American vision of the world. That is, a perspective that creates fictionalized trips that provide space for a voice that would otherwise be peripheral or marginal. At the same time, mostly by the analysis of one of Gamboa’s novels, this Latin American perspective in literature provides further evidence of “the failure of globalization as integration” (182). In this sense, the chapter triumphs at locating spaces —through these fictional trips into China— where hegemonic structures are dismantled and the subjectivity of the Latin American voice, through the narrative, can be heard loud and clear.

Representations of China is certainly a pioneering work of literary study. However, it would have been useful to find more nuanced readings of the literature itself rather than concerns about what is ‘truthful’ or historically accurate, as the corpus was formed by works of fiction. Albeit not essential for the understanding of the volume, there is not enough information on how much the authors selected know about China, nor much commentary on whether they

have ever visited the country. As such, Montt Strabucchi's book inspires its readers to examine studies written by Chinese scholars and emerging PhD dissertations.

Representations of China lives up to its name. It does not delve into the Chinese too much, nor are there many theoretical references particularly concerned about Chinese identity and its 'exoticized' perception, although there are well-established critiques on the matter by Chinese scholars from a range of disciplines. A few examples that bring refreshing approaches to the topics developed in Montt Strabucchi's book, such as Zhang Longxi's seminal works *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (1992) and *From Comparison to World Literature* (2015); Benzi Zhang's 2007 chapter "Against the Grain of Cultural Exoticism: The Other Question"; Olivia Khoo's *The Chinese Exotic: Modern Diasporic Femininity* (2007); and Rey Chow's *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience* (2014), are sources that could inform future readings on representations of China from a Latin American standpoint. This constructive criticism aside, Montt Strabucchi's text provides deep insight as to how some Latin American novelists write about China, its culture, and its people as a figment of imagination, not as a reality.

Overall, Montt Strabucchi has provided a valuable volume which was weaved carefully, shows the author's erudite knowledge of theoretical perspectives and historical locations. The book brings compelling configurations of close readings that will be useful for scholars and students all over the world, especially from Latin America and China.



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