


## Authority and Alterity in Roland Barthes' China / Autoridade e Alteridade na China de Roland Barthes

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### ABSTRACT

In 1974 Roland Barthes, François Wahl, Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva and Marcelin Pleynet spend a month in Mao Zedong's China. The "Tel Quel group", as they were seen, visits the country under the tutelage of Luxingshe Agency, which also provides two guides and translators in order to accompany visitors. Taking as a guideline Barthes's *Travels in China* ([1974] 2009) and the article "Alors, la Chine?" (without translation in English), I will try to identify, describe and interpret the presence of the Chinese Foreigner by the eyes of the French writer, through these spatial and linguistic formulations, as well as the descriptions of the Chinese people. From this reading, in a more abstract degree, situations of exercise of authority and the search for otherness will be the object of reflection, marking the timelessness of the Barthesian gestures of repulsion to the first and the search for the second. Barthes's views will be opposed to those of his fellow travellers, who also reported their impressions once back to France. How is China grasped by the textual plot of travel narratives and the discourse of group members? Which aspects converge and which diverge in these multiple views on the same object, the Foreigner, particularly Chinese, in a moment of political and ideological authoritarianism?

**KEYWORDS:** Roland Barthes; China; Authority; Alterity

### RESUMO

Em 1974 Roland Barthes, François Wahl, Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva e Marcelin Pleynet passam um mês na China de Mao Tsé-Tung. O "grupo de Tel Quel", como era visto, visita o país sob a tutela da Agência Luxingshe, que também providencia dois guias e tradutores para acompanhar os visitantes. Tendo por fio condutor os *Cadernos da viagem à China* ([1974] 2009) e o artigo "E então, China?" (1974) de Barthes, procurarei identificar, descrever e interpretar a presença do estrangeiro chinês aos olhos do escritor francês, por meio de suas formulações espacial e linguística, bem como das descrições dos chineses. Dessa leitura, num grau mais abstrato, serão objeto de reflexão situações de exercício de autoridade e de busca pela alteridade, marcando a atualidade dos gestos barthesianos de repulsa à primeira e de busca pela segunda. Os pontos de vista de Barthes serão contrapostos aos de seus colegas de viagem, que também reportaram suas impressões uma vez de volta à França. Como a China é apreendida pela trama textual das narrativas de viagem e pelo discurso dos membros do grupo? Quais aspectos convergem e quais divergem nesses múltiplos olhares sobre o mesmo objeto, o Estrangeiro, particularmente, chinês, num momento de autoritarismo político e ideológico?

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Roland Barthes; China; Autoridade; Alteridade

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"Authority" and "alterity", although very close in English, as they are almost homophonous terms, have distinct roots. "Authority" comes from the Latin *auctoritas* which, beyond its first meaning, also includes the senses of responsibility and validity. The one who exercises "authority" also has the responsibility to validate and, therefore, to determine and to establish from his or her judgment, what is of value. On the other hand, "alterity" has its origin in *alter*, understood not only as another or different but also as alteration and change. The Other, therefore, has at its origin the mark of movement, of a displacement that causes strangeness. The two terms, "authority" and "alterity", have been going together in the last few years in a troubled coexistence, colliding almost daily, due to the humanitarian crisis generated by the intensified flow of immigrants towards Europe and some countries of the Americas.

The daily news about the wrecks in the Mediterranean Sea and tensions on the Brazilian and US borders, killing thousands who are fleeing from wars, political repression and misery, insistently show that authority and alterity are in the political lexicon at the moment: plebiscites like the one resulting in the option of leaving the United Kingdom from the European Union (2016) and elections of politicians with xenophobic speeches declared or disguised as nationalism, such as Donald Trump in the United States (2016) and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2018), among many others, they show that most populations are simply unwilling to welcome the Other.

The issue of immigration, which covers the way people relate to alterity, thus acquires a political dimension when it exerts influence on a state decision. At the moment, the authority has often been deformed into authoritarianism when it rejects the Other with insensitivity and often even brutality. Politics can also be observed from the literary field, as proposed by Roland Barthes when reflecting on *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975):

The Political is, subjectively, a continuous source of boredom and/or pleasure; it is, further and *in fact* (i.e., despite the arrogance of the political subject), a stubbornly polysemant space, the privileged site of a perpetual interpretation [...] One might conclude from these two observations that the Political partakes of the pure *textual*: an exorbitant, exasperated form of the Text, an unheard-of form which, by its excesses and its masks, perhaps exceeds our present understanding of the Text. (BARTHES, 1977, p.147, author's emphasis)

Understanding the political as "textual" allows one to think about the clash between alterity and authority - and its most perverse form, authoritarianism - from the literature, which enhances the polysemy of the Barthesian Text: understood, in general terms, as the text that shakes the reader, provoking hitherto unusual reflections, the Text, with an uppercase "T",

conceived by Barthes in “From Work to Text” ([1970] 2004 1986) multiplies the possible readings of the relationship between authority and alterity, as one might notice in Barthes's writings on China.

It emerges, from the contact with the Other, in the Barthesian work, a strangeness difficult to define, neighbouring of incomprehension, a relative of aversion, with a hint of curiosity<sup>1</sup>. Barthes experienced this strangeness in two distinct moments, marked at the same time by authority and, at times, even by certain authoritarianism as well as alterity, as this article will seek to demonstrate. The key to understanding these two situations lies in the 1970s Maoist China, visited by the French writer.

As news about the forced labour camps in Russia, where the dissidents of the communist regime were sent, gradually began to arrive in France, doubt arose in the French Lef, which until then had in the French Communist Party (PCF) one of the bastions of the anti-capitalist ideology. The cutting-edge literary magazine *Tel Quel*, run by Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva and Marcelin Pleynet, founded in 1960 and officially allied with the PCF, leaves this position in 1972 and becomes Maoist. More than the Cultural Revolution itself (1966), of which little information was available at the time, the magazine view was based on what was idealized about the Cultural Revolution - notably the supposed preponderant role of culture in the revolution - that many intellectuals adhered to Maoism, clinging to it as an alternative to Stalinist communism that was proved to be dictatorial. Philippe Forest, the author of *Histoire de Tel Quel [Tel Quel History]*, quotes Sollers in this regard:

We were 'Maoist' for the sake of revolt. At that moment, we were immediately entering into contradiction with the Maoists themselves, that is to say with the cohorts of Maoists who thought on an archaic model that Maoism was the return to the pure and hard Marxist tradition, that is, Stalinism. (1995, p. 474, our translation<sup>2</sup>).

In this context, through Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, author of the laudable essay on Maoist China, *De la Chine [From China]* (1971), in transit with the diplomats of that country, an entourage of *Tel Quel* boards to President Mao's China on April 11, 1974. Formed by Sollers, Kristeva and Pleynet, plus Barthes and his editor at Seuil, François Wahl, the group, as was

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<sup>1</sup> This theme has been explored in literature since antiquity, as Julia Kristeva shows in her *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988), a historical overview of the theme of the foreigner in literature and culture, which highlights its marginal status since *The Suppliants* (466- 463 BC) by Aeschylus to the contemporary drama of the immigrant in the big European cities.

<sup>2</sup> « On était 'maoïste' par souci de révolte. A ce moment-là, on entrait immédiatement en contradiction avec les maoïstes eux-mêmes, c'est-à-dire avec les cohortes de maoïstes qui pensaient sur un modèle archaïque que le maoïsme c'était le retour à la tradition pure et dure du marxisme, c'est-à-dire au stalinisme. »

customary to know the country at that time, travels under the Luxingshe Agency's tutelage, the Chinese government agency in charge of foreign visitors. Until May 4, when they return to France, the group visits factories, schools, a university, historical monuments and museums, watches dance shows and volleyball games, goes to the cinema and theater in Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Luoyang and Zion, but they are not allowed to visit a work re-education camp known as “May 7 schools” despite their request.

These activities strictly follow the protocol of the Chinese Agency: the group is accompanied at all times by two guide-interpreters; a local representative of the Communist Party is responsible for presenting each establishment or historic site, highlighting Mao Zedong's role in the country's development. In short, China seen by Barthes, Wahl and the *Telquelians* is the country that Mao's regime intended to expose to the West, where all speeches result in praise for the Cultural Revolution. Constantly subject to the authority of the guides, who defined where to go, who to talk to, and who not to talk to, the group was not at liberty to discover this Other that stood before them. The meeting with the Foreigner in China was mediated by an invisible wall of authoritarianism against which it was not possible to rebel, under penalty of sanctions.

During the trip, everyone takes a lot of notes, photographs what can be photographed, Barthes and Pleynet write journals. These will only be published later: *Travels in China*, by Barthes, will come out in 2009, several years after his death in 1980. His notes tell a lot about how authoritative and oppressive the season in China was: Barthes' constant migraines reflect his boredom and dissatisfaction with the limited paths the entourage was obliged to follow, both physically and at the level of discourse: Barthes patiently writes down the data reported by the heads of factories, museums, universities, hospitals visited, even though it is repeated daily. The writer observes in this repetition of speeches blocks, that is, passages of crystallized speeches that are organized to compose a wall, separating him from the true China.

The discursive oppression practiced by the Chinese authorities - who did not shy away from exercising their authority over foreigners - is so evident even in the writing of Barthes's journal: he expresses his personal opinions, his wishes, his doubts in brackets as if they were breaches in the wall where the writer could express himself freely. Supervised and restricted freedom, and therefore disappointing, does not allow Barthes to satisfy his curiosity. Already on his arrival in Beijing he mentions the question he will have to answer after the trip: “Well, and China?” (2012, p. 8). Rather than grasping socio-political information or knowing Chinese history, art or even landscapes, reading *Travels* makes it clear that for Barthes the answer is an

experience of alterity, that is, knowledge of the Other, of the Chinese. A constant object of his questions and his search, the Chinese are, however, unreachable due to the total absence of contact imposed by the authoritarian Agency, as Barthes observes in a circus show in Shanghai on April 15: "We know nothing, I'll never know anything: who is the boy next to me? What does he do during the day? What is his bedroom like? What is he thinking? What is his sex life like? etc. [...]" (2012, p. 38).

Still in France, on the plane, his first impressions of the Chinese are curious: "Departure from Orly: apart, a dozen Chinese in black jackets with collars turtlenecks, though the guide is in a business casual suit. They look like a traveling covenant" (2012, p. 6). The image is reminiscent of an idea of enclosure, as if, on French territory, the Chinese were trapped: there is a dress code, a limited space reserved for them on the plane, a guide who makes decisions and makes sure that they do not depart from the norm. They are, therefore, excluded from any contact with Westerners, "apart", they are marginal, foreign par excellence. The distance between the Chinese and Barthes widens in the next day, while they are still on the plane: "They [the Chinese] got into the back of the plane, eyes closed, like - will I say it with affection? - little pigs, round animals; confined too, in a sense" (2012, p. 7).

The distance between the observer, Barthes, and the foreigners grows deeper after he drew a comparison between the Chinese and the animals: there would be a difference between species, human and animal. Initially treated as "little pigs," the writer gradually erases all identification from the Chinese group, then calls them "round animals", to make them disappear in the next sentence, relegating to the adjective "confined", without determiner, the mark of animality. Situated in the distance that separates him from the Chinese, Barthes assumes the position of the observer before a people that become his object of observation. The point of view adopted, therefore, is that of a researcher or explorer who wants to know every constituent element of his object; which explains the various questions he raises in his notes.

However, we should not ignore the writer's hesitation in his comparison between the Chinese group and the little pigs: the question "will I say it with affection?" shows an affective disposition that will guide his attempts - all frustrated, by the way - to have an experience of alterity free from the authorities, that is, to find the Foreigner, in China, both in the concrete sense, in erotic encounters, and in the anthropological sense, in acquiring knowledge about the thoughts and habits of the Chinese.

If Barthes cannot overcome the wall that separates him from the Foreigner, if he does not have a contact that allows him to approach and know a little about the foreigners he observes, in China he also becomes the Foreigner observed by the Chinese. From a spatial point of view, he is the one who visits the country, he is the one who does not speak Mandarin, he is the Foreigner. Such an inversion seems unexpected, even uncomfortable, as Barthes writes it down several times in *Travels*. The first time it happens is quite meaningful, as it takes place at Nanjing Zoo on April 19: "Visit to the zoo. A little sunshine (still in that big Tivoli with lakes). Like all zoos in the world. Slowly followed by fifty people. Panda. Double zoo: we look at the panda, fifty people look at us" (2012, p. 76-77).. The observer of the exotic animal becomes the object of observation; the Foreigner draws the attention of the Chinese, in a *mise en abîme* of the function of the gaze. Barthes then finds himself in the place of the panda, an animal, and this time he is not far away, but beside the little pigs on the plane, in a first experience full of alterity: he not only welcomes the Other with interest but suddenly he becomes the Other, the one who is looked at because he arouses interest.

Such a role is not rejected by Barthes and would even be welcomed if it offered him the possibility of establishing some kind of relationship with the Chinese. But this is not the case: in the Longmen Caves in Luoyang on April 23, the writer refers to his group as "holy tourists," as the Chinese express a great deal of curiosity about them, following them on foot, briefly along the way. This does not lead to any kind of contact, because it is a fearful or very respectful curiosity, still suppressed by the guides, not allowing an approximation: "Where do all these people come from, in this pure tourist place? There is no village, nothing next door. And they are there as tourists of us, not of the place or the statues" (2012, p. 124). Still in Luoyang, at the Opera, Barthes writes: "[Yesterday Opera: We are *holy*: they approach en masse to look at us, they move away not to touch us]" (2012, p. 138). Or in Beijing on May 2, at the end of the stay in China: "While the driver doesn't come, the bus is surrounded by a crowd of gaping children. Some civilians, with grave and distant expression, try to disperse them calmly, certainly for modesty and distance from foreigners" (2012, p. 214-215).

The Foreigners, coming from France, go from the category of pandas in the zoo to statues in the historical site, objects of attention and interest, always to some extent untouchable or "sacred," in Barthes's term. As in the tractor factory, where he exchanges glances with a workman, the crowd, flabbergasted by the Western foreigners, silently communicating its curiosity through a naked gaze: "[How they look intensely! A curiosity of a fascinating intensity, amazing, in

the gaze. That is the gaze that is directed not to our person, not even to the body as eros, but abstractly and essentially to the *species*: I am stripped of my body in favor of my germ]" (2012, p. 146). Neither panda nor statue, but simply human, Barthes is reduced to his essence by the questioning gaze of the Chinese who, in turn, due to the closed regime, were not in the habit of seeing Westerners: the novelty of the presence of the French entourage makes its members not only different, but especially rare, unique, special; in a word, exotic, provoking essential questions, for example, about the species to which they belong.

Barthes's desire for the Chinese is, at least at the level of anthropological research, reciprocal: contacts are sought all the time, both from the writer and from the Chinese - "Lots of people looking at us, dumbfounded" (2012, p. 162). Every Foreigner is an object of desire in *Travels in China*, which can be read as a narrative about the desire for the Other repressed by authority.

From this point of view, the most emblematic episode of the trip is the visit to the Huxian peasant painters' exhibition. They write about it: Barthes in *Travels*, Kristeva, in the book *Des Chinoises* [About Chinese Women] (1974) and in a chapter in the novel *The Samurai* (1990), as well as Pleynet in his travel journal *Le Voyage en Chine* [The Voyage to China] (1980, a new edition was released in 2012). On the afternoon of April 25, the group is taken to the small town 45 minutes' drive from Zion to learn about the works of the peasant painters. As Pleynet explains, from 1958, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party noted the regime's ever-praising murals that appeared in the small town. They decided to encourage peasant painters by offering them internships at the School of Fine Arts, a fact that has increased the number of painters and works in Huxian "which serve the propaganda of political movements and illustrate the working methods recommended by the party" (PLEYNET, 2012, p. 81, our translation<sup>3</sup>).

Pleynet, who is also an art critic, casts a benevolent eye on the works he sees, except for Soviet-style ones, in his opinion, "one or two," to note in his diary about the ensemble: "A ratio of scale difference between the Chinese and their environment (rural or urban)" (2012, p. 80-81, our translation<sup>4</sup>). However, this difference is typical of the *naïf* genre in painting, which evidences the author's attempt to grasp Chinese canvases through their insertion in a tradition recognized by Western culture. A possible positive reading of Pleynet's view of the works of peasant painters, therefore, falls apart when one identifies, between the lines of his diary, the maintenance of his

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<sup>3</sup> "[...] qui servent la propagande des mouvements politiques et illustrent les méthodes de travail recommandées par le parti."

<sup>4</sup> "[...] un rapport de différence d'échelle entre le Chinois et son environnement (rural ou urbain)."

Eurocentric point of view, distancing the Other from him and incorporating it into Pleynet's own culture.

After the visit to the exhibition, an inversion takes place: the European group leaves the shed where the screens are exhibited and,

At the entrance to the village where the works of the peasant painters are exhibited, the two or three hundred people who were gathered during our visit seem to consider us with stupefied curiosity (we are the first foreigners to visit this village). We will find them in the same place, leaving two and a half hours later. (PLEYNET, 2012, p. 83, our translation<sup>5</sup>)

As in the episode of the zoo noted by Barthes, in Huxian the Parisian entourage becomes the object of Chinese curiosity. The small town gathers to greet them at the entrance to the shed where the paintings are displayed, and patiently waits for them to leave to see them one last time. The adjective "astonished" qualifies the curiosity with which the peasants look at the Foreigners, the Others: haunted, immobilized by puzzlement, perhaps even numb. A typical reaction when one is faced with something totally new, different, unusual and perhaps even frightening, as if the Chinese were facing some kind of imminent danger... The encounter with the Other?

In *The Samurai*, a novel that refers to the real-life facts of the author, Julia Kristeva, there is a chapter dedicated to the trip of a group of five intellectuals to China, highlighting the same episode, told by the narrator. After describing the route between Zion and the village, during which the group of travelers sees no one,

Abruptly, aliens. The missing peasants were there, huddled together, sitting or crouching in the town square. A lunar silence ... The five get off the minibus and head for the exhibition door. They smile to greet the Chinese comrades. Amazing! The eyes of the crouching people are fixed, expressionless, empty, stunned. No, they are not curious, not admiring, not interrogative, not suspicious, not even angry. Such looks would be aimed at humans, other humans, understand: other Chinese. But the "long-nosed" who come out of unfamiliar cars, wrapped in strange clothes: Huxian peasants have never seen. Animals, another species, visitors from the cosmos? These whites aroused as an atavistic and blind fear, which ignores its humanity as it refuses that of its visitors. All Martians for each other.

– You saw that, they are taking us for aliens! The "Chinese" are us.

Olga [Kristeva] was hallucinating.

– They take us for foreigners purely and simply, but maybe you're right, you don't look at a foreigner like that in Morocco or Saigon, said Sylvain [Pleynet].

– The Huxian comrades for the first time receive foreign friends!

Zhao No 1 [the guide] was trying to dampen the shock.

<sup>5</sup> "À l'entrée du village où se trouvent exposées les œuvres des peintres-paysans, les deux ou trois cents personnes qui ont été réunies à l'occasion de notre visite semblent nous considérer avec une curiosité stupéfaite (nous sommes les premiers étrangers à visiter ce village). Nous les retrouverons au même endroit en sortant deux heures et demie plus tard."



- They are not seeing us because they are not recognizing us as humans. They are wondering if we are from another species other than the human species, which is theirs. (Olga).
- This is deep China. The Middle empire doesn't know the Other. (Hervé. [Sollers])
- The real Wall of China is in this little square. (Bréhal [Barthes] was pleased to express his discomfort from this bias, which had only grown since the beginning of the trip [...]). (1992, p. 230-231, our translation<sup>6</sup>)

The appearance of the peasants is sudden: the characters pass from the deserted path to a crowd that sees them as "extraterrestrial", that is, as beings belonging to another planet. In fact, if the planet of the peasants of Huxian is their region, the group of Parisians can only seem to them to be foreigners, literally, according to Latin etymology, "from outside." The dimension of this foreignness seems only to be expressed by a vocabulary of the lexical field of outer space, manifested by references to the western group as the "visitors of the cosmos" and "Martians." The silence, "lunar", for the character narrator Olga, explicates the distance between the groups, measured metaphorically not in meters or kilometers, which would be little, but in light-years.

The comments of the characters evolve, cascading towards a reflection on the Other: first the narrator Olga feels identified to an extraterrestrial by the Chinese, then reversing the foreign character, hitherto imputed to the Chinese, to her group: "We are the 'Chinese'" demonstrates that "Chinese" is simply a synonym for foreigners, whose maximum degree seems to him to be represented by the inhabitants of another planet. Sylvain feels defined, according to the eyes of the peasants, as a foreigner quite purely and simply, but he notices a difference... which is

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<sup>6</sup> "Brusquement, des extraterrestres. Les paysans disparus étaient là, tassés, assis ou accroupis sur la place du village. Un silence lunaire... Les cinq descendente des Zim et se dirigent vers la porte de l'expo. Ils esquissent des sourires pour saluer les camarades chinois. Incroyable! Les yeux des accroupis les fixent, inexpressifs, plats, stupéfaits. Non, pas curieux, ni admiratifs, ni interrogatifs, ni méfiants, ni même haineux. De tels regards seraient destinés aux humains, aux autres humains, comprenez: aux autres Chinois. Mais des 'longs-nez' comme ça, qui descendent de voitures inconnues, accoutrés de vêtements bizarres: les paysans de Huxian n'en ont jamais vus. Des animaux, une autre espèce, des visiteurs du cosmos? Ces Blancs éveillaient comme une peur atavique et aveugle, ignorant sa propre humanité comme elle refusait celle des visiteurs. Tous des Martiens les uns pour les autres.

– Vous avez vu cela, ils nous prennent pour des extraterrestres! Les 'Chinois', c'est nous. Olga était sidérée.

– Ils nous prennent pour des étrangers, tout simplement, mais peut-être avez-vous raison, on ne regarde pas un étranger comme ça au Maroc ou à Saigon, remarqua Sylvain.

– Les camarades de Huxian reçoivent pour la première fois des amis étrangers!

Zhao n° 1 essayait d'amortir le choc.

– Ils ne nous voient pas, parce qu'ils ne nous prennent pas pour des humains. Ils se demandent si nous ne sommes pas d'une autre espèce que l'espèce humaine qui est la leur. (Olga).

– C'est bien la Chine profonde. L'empire du Milieu ne connaît pas d'Autre. (Hervé).

– La vraie Grande Muraille de Chine, nous l'avons sur cette petite place. (Bréhal était ravi d'exprimer par ce biais sa gene, qui ne faisait que croître depuis le début du voyage) [...]."

In square brackets I wrote down which member of *Tel Quel's* entourage each fictitious name corresponds. We did not have access to the Portuguese translation, which is why we quoted in our translation the original in French.

explained by the guide when he reports that this was the first time the inhabitants of Huxian saw Westerners. The distance between the group and the peasants, the same as between humans and nonhumans (extraterrestrials, Martians), is noted by Olga to be explained by Hervé with an experience previously unheard of for the Chinese of that small town: the confrontation with the existence of the Other. In the analysis of the Westerners, the peasant mass was devoid of individuality, worked, painted, and lived according to the values and principles of the regime, without any kind of identity questioning. The visit of the Parisian entourage then gives it a unique discovery, that of otherness: it reveals to the Chinese the existence of beings distinct from those hitherto known. Knowledge of the Other - which, however, did not seem to be recognized as Other by the Chinese - does not happen. Bréhal creates a synthesizing metaphor: “The true Wall of China is in this little square”, that is, the symbolic wall that separates the Chinese from the five members of the entourage has never been so high and, only through its cracks, muted eyes communicate the silence of strangeness.

With this same experience, Barthes is more economical: he notes the facts, such as the cluster upon arrival of the group - “Village: thick line of inhabitants all along the route: never so celebrated: Pompidou in Aurillac” (2012, p. 150) - and the visit of the exhibition and his appreciation of the works - “[What to say?!] Pure Realism. All in the continuous. Nothing without content” (2012, p. 152). One painting catches his eye: “[Those shown to us for a long time are the most licked, the most banal, the least *naïfs*] [for under the bad painting, a better, thinner, *linear* crop and more *naïf* disposition of space [...]].” (2012, p. 153, emphasis added) Kristeva notes with effusion the same work and deals with it both in *The Samurai* (1992, p. 233-234) and in *Des Chinoises*, book on which reproduces an interview with the artist Li Fenglan, as well as a photo of her and her painting (1974, p. 184-188).

Barthes expresses no surprise, much less all the excitement Kristeva experiences at the stares of people who see foreigners for the first time, reproduced in *The Samurai*. He even jokingly establishes a comparison with the French president Georges Pompidou's visit to his hometown of Aurillac. Such a reaction, perhaps, is due to the lack of novelty in the situation for him, which, six days earlier, had already inscribed in Nanjing at the zoo, the same reaction as the Chinese before the group.

This gaze at the group, at the zoo, or Huxian, but also at various situations reported by Barthes, is the same as the Westerners direct to the Chinese: the positions are interchangeable and the fact that they become the object of curiosity of those who constitute the object of the

entourage curiosity arouses a self-reflection by the only foreigner squared among the travelers: not Chinese, but also not French, the Bulgarian - and therefore from Eastern Europe - Kristeva writes in *Des Chinoises*:

It is not my goal, and perhaps it is futile to try to define everything that in Chinese civilization and modern society determines the unnameable look of the Huxian peasants who, in fact, did nothing but return my gaze to them without daring show them, full of universalist humanism, proletarian fraternalism and (why not?) false colonialist civility (1974, p. 15, our translation<sup>7</sup>).

The mirroring between foreigners leads the author to a prolific self-criticism: Kristeva establishes a linear double meaning relationship by recognizing the equality of the looks exchanged between the Chinese and the European group. Doing so, she makes the space that separates the Chinese from Western travelers no longer an unbridgeable chasm, but above all a space for dialogue, knowledge and learning from the Other, as well as from itself. Writing is the gesture that allows filling this space with observations, descriptions, reflections, moods. At a time when in France a position on China meant defending or rejecting the beliefs in the French Communist Party, very lucidly, Kristeva ponders: "Writing *for* or *against*: the old game of the engaged militant's in the situation. This can become servile, can become subjected: this attitude always loses the chance that the discovery of the *other* may give us the question of what, here and now, is new, almost inaudible, disturbing" (1974, p. 15, our translation, author's emphasis<sup>8</sup>).

Even without saying it openly, Barthes's texts on China show that he has a similar view to Kristeva: instead of closing in on a position - taken before the trip or not - Barthes prefers not to speak out for or against Mao's regime. For him, it is taken into account only the people he did not meet, the landscapes seen through the glass of the train, of the car, and the windows of the museums, the innumerable insipid teas that contaminate the whole environment and his Chinese imagination. At the very beginning of the trip, already on the second day, Barthes realizes what will be valid for the whole period in China: "I feel that I cannot enlighten them [the Chinese] at all - but only enlighten us from them. So, what is to be written is not *Well, and China?* But *Well, and France?*" (2012, p. 9).

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<sup>7</sup> "Ce n'est pas mon but, et il est peut-être inutile d'essayer de cerner tout ce qui, dans la civilisation et la société moderne chinoises, détermine le regard innommable des paysans de Huxian qui, en fait, ne faisaient rien d'autre que me renvoyer le regard que moi j'avais pour eux sans oser le leur montrer, pétrie d'humanisme universaliste, de fraternalisme prolétarien et (pourquoi pas?) de fausse civilité colonialiste."

<sup>8</sup> "Écrire *pour* ou *contre*: vieux jeu du militant engagé en situation. Cela peut servir, cela peut asservir: cela perd toujours la chance que la découverte de l'*autre* peut avoir de nous interroger sur ce qui, ici et maintenant, est nouveau, à peine audible, dérangeant."

The question that initially seeks to know the Other is inverted and points to Barthes's own cultural identity. To what extent has this search for the Other resulted in your encounter with yourself? The trip to China can be seen as a reflection on the role of political discourse - and the obligation to adhere to it - in the French society of the time. It may even serve to rethink the ideological polarities that dominate political discourse today.

Back in Paris, *Tel Quel* launches an issue specially dedicated to China in the fall, in which Sollers, Kristeva and Pleyne publish articles praising the Mao regime. Although aware of the strong censorship to which they were imposed, the three intellectuals nevertheless emphasize that the Cultural Revolution is made by language, which the ubiquitous dazibaos, to them, are proof of. Newly converted to Maoism, and especially unable to see a different left-wing political path, they had no choice but to try to interpret what they saw positively. According to Forest, the *Telquian* Maoism had a particularity: “[...] for example, in the literary plan, it was a highly elaborated technique and product, a laboratory whose utility others did not see” (1995, p. 474, our translation<sup>9</sup>). Focused on literary research, they closed their eyes to the oppression of Mao's regime.

Without political commitment to *Tel Quel's* position, Wahl publishes in the *Le Monde* newspaper a series of four articles entitled “La Chine sans Utopie” [China without Utopia], which points to convergence between the Mao regime and Stalinism, undoing the ideal image of Maoism so widespread in French intellectuals.

In this highly polarized context, where authoritarianism was felt on both sides, Barthes found himself politically isolated. Although very close to Sollers and Kristeva, he also publishes in the *Le Monde* newspaper the brief article “Well, and China?” on May 24, 1974. Frustrating everyone, he stands neither for nor against Maoism. His text is simply neutral in every way; it describes, above all, the questions that a traveler poses before visiting the country without, however, getting an answer: China decrees the bankruptcy of hermeneutics when it refuses all meaning. From then on, for Barthes, “a new field is revealed: that of delicacy, or better yet (I dare the word, risking to take it back later): that of insipidity” (2005, p. 184). Barthes's description of China comes under the signs of 'delicacy', 'insipidity': the landscapes have pale colors, the tea is bland, the bodies of men and women are uniform. The only exceptions are the cooking, the children, and the ubiquitous dazibaos' writing, and of course the "Political Text," which he chooses not to discuss, unlike his fellow travelers.

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<sup>9</sup> “[...] par exemple, sur le plan littéraire, était une technique et un produit hautement élaborés, un laboratoire dont les autres ne voyaient absolument pas l'utilité.”

The neutral text did not please either Mao supporters or President Mao's critics. Barthes was heavily attacked; his stance was not understood and again his discretion was seen as non-engagement: a renowned intellectual, a political stance was expected of him; however, it was deprived of ideological-political dialogue by authoritarianism that demanded a party. Until the following year, on the occasion of the republishing of "Well, and China?" In platelet form by editor Christian Bourgois, Barthes added an explanatory note to the text, spelling out his position. As always practiced and defended in his intellectual trajectory, the writer was not interested in the common, obvious, expected places; his place has always been the unexpected, the space of the nuances, between (places, ideas, texts, speeches...). Barthes finally criticizes the obligation to take up a political discourse, notably on the theme "China", defending his right, which is that of the modern writer (and no longer the writer of the generations of Gide, Malraux and Sartre):

This negative hallucination is not gratuitous, it is meant to respond to the hallucination mode with which many westerners view popular China: a dogmatic, violently affirmative/negative or falsely liberal mode. Is it not, after all, the banal idea of the politician to think that he can come to language only in the form of a *direct* political discourse? The intellectual (or the writer) has no place - or this place is only the Indirect: it was to this utopia that I tried to give a *tuned* (musically) speech. We must love the music, the Chinese too. (2005, p. 190).

Barthes was a writer and "Well, and China?" was one more of his writings. What he saw in the country was the spectacle that the regime wanted to show to Europeans; better is what he glimpsed, or saw indirectly, through the cracks in the invisible wall that separated him from the Chinese. His Text, which is, therefore, the product of a scripture, the work of a writer in the Barthesian sense (2004, p. 65-75), confuses with what he experienced in China and is perhaps even more authentic than any other political article or essay. Leaving aside a dogmatic view of the country - required by the political polarization of the moment - Barthes chose the indirect way to write about China, tuned musically to what he really knew about the country.

In this sense, to respect the Other - China, its people, its history and its culture - is to portray it as it is, not only repeating or repudiating a given discourse, political in this case but surpassing it, deepening impressions, debugging images, reconstructing a time, in the musical time of the Other. This reconstruction is "Well, and China?", a delicate pearl in the Barthesian literature that caused controversy but was soon forgotten. A Text that is not intended to explain China, nor to make the praise or criticism of Maoism; therefore, a Text that does not seek to apprehend it, fix it, integrate it into a system of thought guided by authority, the western one; a

Text that is China glimpsed by Barthes, without touching it, without changing its properties, such as Jean Baudrillard's exotic radical, for whom "Exoticism survives only from the impossibility of meeting, of merging, of exchanging differences" (1991, p. 156, our translation<sup>10</sup>). Put in another way, and in the wake of Victor Segalen of *Essai sur l'exotisme* [Essay on Exoticism] (1978), for whom the exotic is synonymous with an irreducible, unassimilable Diverse. For Baudrillard "What dominates is not the regime of difference and indifferenciation, but eternal incomprehensibility, the irreducible strangeness of cultures, of habits, of faces, of languages" (1991, p. 157, our translation<sup>11</sup>).

Untouchable, irreducible, the Chinese to Barthes are a hallucination:

By creating a sweet hallucination of China as an object situated outside the bright color, strong flavor and brutal sense [...]. I wanted to connect in one movement the feminine (maternal?) infinity of the object itself, this unprecedented way that China had, in my view, of exacerbating the meaning, placidly and forcefully, and the right to a special discourse: that of a slight drift, or even a desire for silence - for "wisdom", perhaps [...] (2005, p. 189-190).

Tuning his writing to China he saw, recreating it textually, Barthes does it with the fluid outline of hallucination, a mixture of reality and fantasy, metamorphosing the country of hard political blocks into an unclear, very mysterious image, the object of desire. Certainly not the same desire that led him to join Tel Quel's entourage, in line with ethnographic curiosity. However, Barthes created a space of desire, pale in color and conducive to rhythmic movement, a space of lightness and clarity amidst the dark rudeness that enveloped him in Paris in 1974. Unaware of Barthes's writings on China, Baudrillard seems to have reconstituted the same hallucinated image, ready to be shaped according to the crack through which it was seen, through the Chinese wall:

Self-desire and discovery are replaced in the temptation of exile by the desire of the other and his crossing. Often the looks and the loving gestures are at a distance from exile, the language expatriates into words that are afraid to mean, the bodies are like a soft hologram in sight and touch, without resistance and therefore conducive to being marked in every way by desire as if it were an airspace. (1991, p. 65, our translation<sup>12</sup>)

<sup>10</sup> "El exotismo sólo sobrevive de la imposibilidad del encuentro, de la fusión, del intercambio de las diferencias."

<sup>11</sup> "Lo que domina no es el régimen de la diferencia y la indiferenciación, sino la incomprehensibilidad eterna, la extrañeza irreductible de las culturas, de las costumbres, de los rostros, de los lenguajes."

<sup>12</sup> "El deseo propio y el descubrimiento son sustituidos en la tentación del exilio por el deseo del otro y su travesía. Ya muchas veces las miradas y los gestos amorosos tienen la distancia del exilio, el lenguaje se expatria en palabras que tienen miedo a significar, los cuerpos son como un holograma blando a la vista y al tacto, sin

In times of intense political debate, so often represented by the clash of so-called “right” ideas against so-called “left” ideas, there is another lesson from Barthes: the right not to adhere to any of the pre-molded discourses, with their arguments ready and their weapons always pointed the opposite way, but instead to the openness for the reader to create his own way, biased in the middle, between the two poles, hallucinating, perhaps, a world without walls, without authoritarianism, and with alterity.

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resistencia y propicio, por consiguiente, a ser estriado en todos los sentidos por el deseo como un espacio aéreo.”

