CHINESE DREAMS

Pound, Brecht, *Tel quel*

Chinese Dreams
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For my parents

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Preface

> I used to say, to hell with martyrs' palms, all beacons of art, the inventor's pride, the plunderer's frenzy; I expected to return to the Orient and to original, eternal wisdom. But this is evidently a dream of depraved laziness!
>
> —Arthur Rimbaud

It reflects the force of expectations people have about identity and scholarship that ever since I started thinking and writing about China and the West some eight years ago, I've been asked every once in a while if I'm part Chinese. (I'm not.) My answer usually prompts this follow-up: "Why are you interested in China?"

What that question asks for is a story, a story of how I became interested in a culture that is essentially *not mine.* As a question, it reflects a series of expectations about the things people like to think about, and how they come to like to think about them: people expect other people to study things that come from cultural identities or formations that are essentially *theirs* (nationally, ethnically, sexually, in terms of gender or class formation). When that pattern gets broken, there's some sense that the fascination or interest produced there must have happened in some unique or intriguing way—in a manner that does not simply retell a story everyone already knows. Like Tolstoy's happy families, perhaps, those who study their own cultures have motivations that are all more or less the same. But those who study cultures not their own apparently each come to that study in their own little way.

In 1994 I decided, toward the end of a lengthy intellectual turn towards the cultural ramifications of Western imperialism, that I ought to learn a non-Western language. The best way to afford this was, at the time, to live at home, so I moved back in with my parents and looked up the summer catalogue of courses at Ohio State University. They offered Chinese and Japanese, and I chose the former for reasons that remain unclear to

me, though I think they had to do both with an interest in Marxist theory and a sense that China would, in the next decade or so, become an important thing to know about, economically and politically (on that latter score I was more right than I would have imagined). Classes were six hours a day, and I loved them, coming home at night and dreaming in Chinese after only a few weeks. The following summer, I went to Tianjin to study language and the Peking Opera. Two years later, just having started writing a dissertation, I spent a year in Beijing, learning more Chinese, attending classes in comparative literature, and—not atypically for foreigners in China today—appearing several times on television as a singer on variety shows or, once, as a commentator on the U.S. soccer team's chances in the 1998 World Cup. Out of that experience comes, at least partially, this book.

One response to such a story remarks that, despite the perhaps-charming specificity of its details, it remains very much a cliché. The fascinations of China's language, its people, and its geopolitics have long motivated Westerners to visit China, prompting a variety of similarly "unusual" stories about their interactions with Chinese people and Chinese culture. Some of the more prominent historical motivations for such travel have faded: China no longer presents, as it did to Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century and Protestant ones in the nineteenth, a vast challenge to biblical history (though it remains an important reservoir of potential converts). But other motivations remain as vibrant in our century as they were hundreds of years ago. Figures as disparate as Leibniz, Ezra Pound, and Jacques Derrida have all, at one point or another, hitched their intellectual wagons to the aesthetic and political intensities of the Chinese language;[1] more prosaically, some become interested in China through Buddhism, Taoism, or even kung-fu (as did my roommate in Beijing in 1997). Behind many of these fascinations flits the specter of the "ancient and wondrous East," source of fairy tales, fantastical travel narratives (the earliest of which was Marco Polo's), delicately sexualized fantasies (Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*), postmodern iterations of narrativity (Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*), and contemporary political or military intrigue (the 1997 Richard Gere spy thriller, *Red Corner*).

Secondary literature on such Western encounters with China has, in the past fifteen years, enjoyed something of a bull market. Colin MacKer-

ras's *Western Images of China* appeared in 1989; J. A. G. Roberts's two volumes, *China through Western Eyes* (nineteenth and twentieth centuries), were published in 1992; Zhaoming Qian's *Orientalism and Modernism* in 1995; Robert Kern's *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* in 1996. Other contributors to the field include Haun Saussy (*The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic,* 1993, and *Great Walls of Discourse,* 2002), David Porter (*Ideographia,* 2001), Ming Xie (*Ezra Pound and the Appropriation of Chinese Poetry: Cathay, Translation, and Imagism,* 1998), Steven Yao (*Translation and the Languages of Modernism,* 2002), Yunte Huang (*Transpacific Displacement,* 2002), Zhang Longxi (*The Tao and the Logos,* 1992, and *Mighty Opposites,* 1999), Lisa Lowe (*Critical Terrains,* 1991), and Marie-Paule Ha (*Figuring the East,* 2000). Worthy of separate mention is the immensely important ongoing work of Rey Chow, who in *Woman and Chinese Modernity* (1991), *Writing Diaspora* (1993), *Ethics after Idealism* (1998), and *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2002) has relentlessly pursued the most difficult and most compelling questions that come out of the encounter between China and the West.[2]

In 1998, popular historian Jonathan Spence waded into the debate with *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds.* Seeking at the close of his book to explain the ongoing Western fascination with China, Spence writes: "The curious readiness of Westerners for things Chinese was there from the beginning, and it has remained primed, over the centuries, by an unending stream of offerings. Precisely why this should be so remains, to me, a mystery. But the story we have traced seems to prove that China needs no reason to fasten itself into Western minds" (241). This is very much a non-answer to the question "why China?" Though in the first sentence Spence asserts that the West's interest in China "was there from the beginning," at the end of the second sentence the *reasons* for that fascination are declared a "mystery." By the third sentence he has concluded that China "needs no reason" to fascinate the West. But no matter how unsure they may be about the specific origins of the West's interest in China, these sentences—especially in their attribution of activity and passivity—carry with them a more general theory of both the West and the China that fascinates it. While Spence's West has a certain "readiness . . . from the beginning," it remains primed *by* Chinese offerings; it is China that "needs no reason to fasten itself" into the Western mind. In the

passive construction of the first sentence ("primed . . . by") and the self-reflexive infinitive of the second, active one, China is given the grammatical position of the actor ("China needs no reason to fasten itself," yes, but when it does fasten, it fastens *itself*). Whatever the rationale behind the West's readiness—which, "there from the beginning," may have a genetic importance—Spence suggests that China does something to keep such readiness "primed"; in other words, the West, though ready for China, does not necessarily decide its own fascination.

Does such a scenario not confirm China's most tantalizing stereotype? China—mysterious, irrational, evocatively provocative—beguiles. Such a characterization may be the inevitable result of asking "why China?" If China fascinates the West, then the natural reaction is to attribute that fascination to something particular—undefinable, but particular—about China itself, to say, Yes, China fascinates because it is this way, or that way. And looking down the long list of Westerners fascinated by China, the temptation to make that particular fascinating aspect of China the *same one*—to make it some ontological marker of what we believe to be historical Chineseness—is practically irresistible. Many Westerners interested in China, including some of those discussed in this book, have taken this route, pointing to some apparently unchanging, essential aspect of China or its culture (the peasant character of the people, the landscape, the ideology of its writing system, the texts of classical Confucian thought) as the driving force behind their interest.

The trouble with such explanations—indeed of any general answer to the question of "why China?"—lies partly in the annoying lack of similarity among different people's Chinas. The early Qing dynasty China of many Jesuit missionaries bears little resemblance, geopolitically, to the humiliated signatory of various "unequal treaties" in the nineteenth century, which in turn does not look much like the cultural-revolutionary China of the early 1970s. Add to this the changes in the West, throw in a consideration of the cultural or biographical factors in play for individual authors, and it becomes clear that we have many different Chinas, many of them incoherent to other members of their species (if species there be).

While there is a certain appeal to the retreat to specificity and the idea of innumerable Chinas, each one uniquely tied to a particular historical or cultural circumstance, such a retreat simply moves the ontological maker over onto the West. If one no longer acknowledges China's referential

stability, it is easy enough to replace that instability with a stereotyped West whose major characteristic is that it invents Chinas, for whatever reason deemed to be one of its essential features: the West fascinates itself with China because of its imperializing drive, its scientific curiosity, its penchant for exploration, its insistent pursuit of otherness—each of these there "from the beginning," much as Spence believes the West's "readiness" to be. The simplest response to such a conception of the West simply explodes the stereotype with specificity. The West is no more the same every time it interacts with China than China is when it interacts with the West.

Why, then, China? The question is probably a bad one, or rather, it is good only inasmuch as it opens up discussion about the relation between geopolitical space—an area on the Pacific side of the Eurasian landmass with a more or less continuous history of being conceived as a political identity—and the realms of thought. As far as *Chinese Dreams* is concerned, the mapping or reading of myths—tracing the specificities of China through their various permutations—is a useful exercise in intellectual history and cross-cultural reading; it has something to teach about the ways the West has thought itself through its articulation of a set of ideas named "China." At one level, to be sure, by finding "Chinese dreams"[3] in the work of Ezra Pound, Bertolt Brecht, and the writers of the Parisian journal *Tel quel,* this book both assumes and assigns similarities among those myths; by putting together the texts it does the book theorizes a more general commonality to the "Chinas" it reads. And yet I have tried not to let that general theory do anything other than occasionally interrupt the more specific stories each text tells, rather than shape the readings from the beginning. Each chapter is staged so that the text has, whenever possible, the last word—if not directly in the reading then at least when it comes to the more general question of "why China?" It's precisely the movement between an understanding of these stories as at least partially generic—as being to some extent alike—and an appreciation of their sometimes exquisite unlikenesses that provides, for me, the clearest understanding of the stakes of reading and making meaning.

Chinese Dreams focuses on three groups of texts, each organized around an author or group of authors. Chapter 1 opens with the strange fact of Ezra Pound's translations of Chinese poetry in *Cathay,* published in 1915. History's judgment that Pound, despite knowing no Chinese,

translated the poems better than anyone else ever has, sets the stage for a series of questions about how Westerners come to "know" China, and how much of that knowledge is the ghostly reflection of their own desires. As it approaches Pound's translations, the chapter is especially concerned to discern "Chineseness," to ask what in Pound's modernism may have been literally Chinese, or may have been taken as Chinese. Following up on *Cathay*'s national origins, much of the latter half of the chapter discusses the immense buildup of critical discourse on the question of Pound and China. That discourse, sometimes more clearly than Pound's own work, points to some of the stakes of the "Why China?" question in our time, particularly around the difficulties of the West's orientalism and its critique, inaugurated by Edward Said. Particularly as it focuses on *Cathay,* criticism's attempt to decide the poetry's national origins—English or Chinese?—frames one of the political dimensions of East/West literary criticism. Tracing the way "Pound and China" criticism has struggled to define Pound's interest in China relative to both orientalism and modernism, this opening chapter establishes a staging ground for the next two.

The second chapter centers on the work of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht (though as I eventually remark the idea of "Brecht" as a single author is itself a hotly contested issue). After looking at Brecht's translations of Chinese poetry, I consider the ways in which a certain ideology of Chinese translation, possibly carried over from Pound, shapes the reception of Brecht's "Chinese" poems. Much of the discussion addresses Brecht's "*Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst*" (1936; translated by John Willett as "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting"). It argues that one ought to understand Brecht's famous *Verfremdungseffekt* at least partially by looking at its "Chinese" origins, and particularly Brecht's experience of "strangeness" (*Befremdung*) as he watched a performance of Chinese Peking Opera in Moscow in 1935. Unlike Pound, who seemed happiest when truly getting down to the genuine Chineseness of things, Brecht wishes to rid the Chinese alienation-effect of its original Chineseness, and make it fully his own. But can you have "Chinese" acting without China? Or is a measure of its Chinese "strangeness" always left behind in the experience, like a taste in the mouth?

From Brecht I turn to the Parisian avant-garde journal *Tel quel,* which was at the center of a certain radical version of French Maoism in the late

1960s and 1970s, and whose interest in China culminated in a two-week trip there in April and May 1974. For the Telquelians—Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, Marcelin Pleynet, Roland Barthes, and François Wahl—China became the name of both the "revolution in action" and the "revolution in language" that they believed were not only inextricably linked but also on the verge of taking place. As *Tel quel* moved into Maoist politics, those politics were made to stand in for a more general aesthetic theory stemming from the group's literary poststructuralism. But the trip to China in 1974 would, rather than reinforce this political radicalism, disrupt it; the group's reminiscences of that trip in light of a recurrent reference to Brecht and to Chinese theater lead us to ask why it proved to be such a disappointment. Following the return from Beijing, the Telquelians outgrew and eventually repudiated their Chinese interest; their charged writings on China run through a wild, wide gauntlet of emotions, culminating most intoxicatingly in Julia Kristeva's fierce nostalgia for the lost opportunities of *Tel quel*'s revolution.

Though each chapter centers its readings around texts by Pound, Brecht, and the members of *Tel quel,* the chapters are not *about* those authors in a strict sense. In the first chapter, for instance, my subject is not simply the particular manner in which Pound related to China but rather a broader field of discourse called something like "Ezra Pound and China," which includes not only Pound but other English translators, as well as American, English, and Chinese critics working on Pound's relation to China. In short, I am reading a discourse that stretches well past the particular work of the author Ezra Pound to address the more general stakes in the presence of "Chineseness" (genuine or mythical) in Pound's work; I am not giving a definitive statement on whether or not his China was truly Chinese. The same is true for Brecht and *Tel quel;* throughout the book I differentiate as little as possible between "primary" and "secondary" texts (including the text of actual China itself). As for the choice of these three focal points: there could have been others. In the twentieth century, the French writer Victor Segalen is one obvious choice, as is the American Pearl S. Buck. Ultimately, the book begins and ends where it does because the aim was a linguistic and temporal diversity across the twentieth century—and the recognition of "major" authors—that might begin to suggest some of the larger contours and importances of the "China" question.

Throughout *Chinese Dreams,* the idea that the meaning of "China" remains in many instances very particularly *constructed*—and rarely in the same way twice—is observed with as much rigor as possible. But this brings up another problem: in a book on Western understandings of China, attention might be paid not only to the vagaries of "China," but also to variations in "the West"—the object whose interests in things called "Chinese" is the subject of the book. To theorize a "West and China" requires remembering that even as the question of how the West defines China becomes important and interesting, any definition of China by the West depends, intellectually, on an unstated theory of the West. While I have looked quite specifically at how each author presents a China, I use "the West" and "Western" in a relatively unreconstructed manner to refer to Western Europe plus North America. There is thus an imbalance between the text's attention to the various Chinas and Chinesenesses it encounters and its use of "the West" and "Western," two concepts that remain, to some extent, undisturbed. The West's "West" is, in one sense, the name of the book's limits.

This nod, then, to limitation: As Jan Hokenson has remarked, the meaning of the word *West* differs immensely depending on its linguistic and cultural context. For the French, the *tradition occidentale* refers quite precisely to the intellectual and philosophical traditions leading from the ancient Greeks into Europe, and does not include the United States. But *occidental(e)* almost always gets translated as "West" in English, with no mention of the different valences of this word in English and French.[4] In another context, for the Idaho-born Pound, who identified deeply both with his American wildness and the European intellectual traditions, the West might have included both at the same time but not in the sense in which the currently undifferentiated words *the West* have come to refer, at the end of this century, to the combination of capitalist formation and cultural/political preference that now enables one to see the United States and Western Europe as part of the same larger thing. As for Brecht, though he lived in the United States for years during World War II, he concerned himself primarily with Europe (both Western and Eastern) and its traditions.

"Chinese dreams" is thus a topic whose geographic origins can be taken two ways, either via a focus on its dream-space China, or the West, its dreaming subject.[5] But the second word, "dreams," also merits atten-

tion. It is given weight and a certain reading by the quotation from Rimbaud that opens this preface: "I expected to return to the Orient and to original, eternal wisdom. But this is evidently a dream of depraved laziness!" Rimbaud's take on the Chinese dream highlights its status as a cliché. "Depraved" translates *grossière*—crass, crude, even ignorant or stupid; the dream is "lazy" because it involves little original thought. The (self-)mockery in Rimbaud's tone jibes well with a certain style of dream-reading, wherein a stance taken up just outside the dreamer's lust-blinded field of vision allows for a rich appreciation of the foolishness of desire.[6]

Given the theoretical sophistication of contemporary literary criticism, such a stance is readily available to those who wish to take it up vis-à-vis those Westerners who dreamed through China. In the decades since the publication of Said's invaluable *Orientalism,* critics have learned to look a certain way at texts that deal with encounters between the West and the rest, and in turn have understood more about how constructions of otherness work, and how the invention of otherness inevitably grounds a sense of self. From that perspective, the orientalism of the authors in this book—their seemingly crass laziness, the manner in which their fantasies about the East shaped and were shaped by their own worldview—is obvious. One could wonder, then, how could these writers have been so . . . *orientalist*? How could Kristeva have imagined that the Chinese people had no unconscious? Did Ezra Pound really repeat that old saw about ancient Chinese wisdom? This obviousness often produces a critique that's basically ironic at the author's expense, one that begins with an "ah-ha," as in "ah-ha, I've caught you being a hypocrite, or a fool, or blind to your own desires." I think at this point such critiques are wearing a little thin. Probably they were, in the parlance of the times, always already worn thin. What such critiques hear is always more than what the text gives, always the text's secret. Instead of figuring out what in the text is new to these texts—what their secrets are—I have tried to hear what is new to me, and therefore to learn something *from* the texts, not just something *about* them. So if the book seems, at times, to be defending the work of those texts it reads, it is partly, I think, because it tries to take dreams and dreaming seriously.

In a discussion of David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* Rey Chow remarks that while fantasy has been recognized as central to orientalist

preoccupations, "the problem of fantasy . . . is usually dismissed moralistically" (*Ethics,* 75). Moralistic critiques of Western fantasies about the East depend on the unstated premise that truthful communication devoid of misperception is possible. What is more interesting, Chow writes, is to understand fantasy (and dreams) as "not simply a matter of distortion or willful exploitation, but rather as an inherent part of our consciousness, our wakeful state of mind" (76). We currently live in a culture—both academic and otherwise—that strikes me as especially inimical to such a consideration of dreams and fantasies. The vast majority of dream discourse involves explaining or revealing the dream's hidden meaning, treating the dream as a cipher to be translated into a language that is, in the light of day, sometimes shameful, sometimes perverse, but especially and inevitably *ordinary.* What such criticism forgets is that everyone dreams, and that one of the conditions of dreaming is precisely that one does not know one is doing it. For the authors in this book, China named in its dream-state a wild, incandescent experience of thought, an experience that allowed them to bend the limits of what they believed it was possible to know. *Chinese Dreams* aims, then, to record not only the causes and effects of that Chinese dream—its practical shapes, its shifting sources of origin—but also to acknowledge the lived experience of its opaque, undomesticating imagination.

My teacher and friend Jane Gallop deserves a good deal of the credit for this book; it was she who suggested, upon my return from Tianjin in 1995, that I write a dissertation having something to do with China, "since you seem to have liked it there so much." I owe her an immense debt of gratitude, both for that idea and her subsequent advice, criticism, and support, which continues to sustain me. I have been lucky to have had many wonderful teachers, including Kevin Michael, Phil Courier, John Glavin, Bruce Smith, Amy Robinson, Henry Schwarz, Gregory Jay, and Herbert Blau, all of whom contributed to my becoming a literary scholar. This book has benefited from their influence as well as from the generous help of Marcus Bullock, Rey Chow, Panivong Norindr, Kathleen Woodward, and Michelle Yeh, who commented on some portion or all of the text.

The most difficult challenge in getting from the dissertation to a book lay in framing the work so that it took part in a larger conversation on

China and the West. Timothy Billings, Christopher Bush, Haun Saussy, and Steven Yao showed me where the best parts of that conversation were. Without the talk we shared—in Palo Alto, Montreal, Columbus, Austin, New Haven, Boulder, San Francisco, Philadelphia, San Juan, San Diego—the book would have been much longer in the writing. Many of these ideas were worked out in conversation with other friends, including Christian Gregory, Astrid Henry, Kelly Klingensmith, Emily Littleton, Tim Lynch, and Jake York. I am grateful to those at the University of Michigan Press, including Ingrid Erickson, Allison Liefer, Marcia LaBrenz, LeAnn Fields, and the Press's anonymous readers, who worked on my behalf to improve the manuscript. Megan Massino made putting together the index easy and fun. I was helped along the way by fellowships from the Graduate School at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and a year-long Boren Fellowship from the Academy for Education Development, which allowed me to spend 1997–98 in Beijing. *Chinese Dreams* was completed at the University of Arizona, where both my colleagues and students continue to astonish me with their generosity and brilliance; I owe a debt of gratitude to Susan Hardy Aiken, Laura Berry, Charlie Bertsch, Sean Cobb, Bill Epstein, Larry Evers, Amy Kimme Hea, and Greg Jackson for their friendship and support. I reserve a special thanks for the incomparable Xu Bing, whose art speaks precisely to those intersections and encounters that motivate my work, and who so graciously offered to illustrate the book's cover.

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