

6 Concluding remarks

In the introduction to *Twentieth-Century Literary Encounters in China: Modernism, Travel, and Form*, Jeffrey Mathern underlined the need to “delve into the history of writing in order to better understand the constant push and pull between the real and the fictive, the political and the imaginary, the self and the other” (2020: 2). I share Mathern’s view on all that the history of the writing of China can reveal in its twofold facet as both producer and product of meanings of it. As this research has shown, the extent of its capacity as a product is not limited to what it can tell us about China. More importantly, it has been able to reveal, as a producer, the world mappings traced by the one who writes to the extent of showing how through the very act of writing the very boundaries that define where “the self” ends and where “the other” starts are renegotiated through the reshaping of the writer’s identities.

The study of the Latin American travel writing on China has yielded important findings. To begin with, as I argued in the first chapter, in the study of travel writing persists a colonized epistemological framework that limit the position of Latin America in the written cartographies of global traveling to that of the destination to produce knowledge about, denying Latin Americans their place as travelers and writers of the world. In this regard, not only the archive gathered for this research but also the analysis developed demonstrated that, even though the China-Latin America encounters have materialized through a wide variety of means, within its vast archive of cultural products, travel writing has been a primary channel for the documentation of these transpacific trajectories. In it remain an extensive and alternative source for the introduction of new academic discussions, but also for the widening of the scope of longstanding debates on the relation between literature and cross-cultural representation.

Echoing Torres-Rodríguez (2019: 20–21, 25) and Hubert’s (2023a: 176) on a de-provincialized perspective over the China-Latin America historical and cultural exchanges, the Latin American writing of China has also revealed itself not only able to cross geographic but epistemic borders. Thus, far from being the expression of a peripheral orientalism that only reproduces meanings of China, as a colonial subsidiary of European orientalist practices, it demonstrated to also be able to devise new meanings, proposing and embodying spaces of confrontation of colonized layouts. In this sense, and continuing with Mathern’s remarks, the reading of the studied corpus not only unveiled the presence of a ‘tension’ between the real and the fictive, the political and the imaginary, but left evidence of how the encounter with China, and the writing of that encounter, is historically mediated by a renegotiation of power distributions and boundaries.

The experience of a wider world that China represented on the Latin American map of imagination, to which Jorge J. Locane referred to as a “*ampliación de la experiencia de mundo*” [Expansion of the experience of the world] (2020: 56) derived in a faded division between “the political” and “the imaginary”. Their contact implied a political widening of its own boundaries since in the process of imagining and writing China, the traveler reimagined and rewrote from other world coordinates their Latin Americanness. Along the same lines, the limits between “the real” and “the fictive” were also contested. In fact, the journey to China, which always began as a journey towards a fiction in the first place, turned into the creation of new realities, manifested in new political projects, new intellectual and artistic networks as well as new literary circulations that came about at the margins of the colonial bond with the developed West. It is in this sense that the meaning of the marginality in which this cultural encounter is inscribed is reinterpreted and reappropriated.

Evidently, although the degrees to which each traveler reclaimed that territory through their writing was quite variable, throughout this more than a century of travel writing of China it became evident that as early as the 19th century the encounter with it allowed the Creole traveler to reimagine their place in the world. Even in this century, when the Latin American was only recently inventing itself as a national project through the formation of an identity deeply anchored in the reproduction of colonial constructs, the writing of China provided a space of contestation. Through this space the meaning of “European” and “Western” as well as those of “East”, “South” or “Latin America” were permanently reformulated. Hence, it is possible to conclude that through the representation of their traveling impressions of China, each travel writer outlined their own global cartographies in which the interaction between centers and peripheries were much more malleable and dynamic.

Following Enrique Dussel’s postulate on the simultaneous emergence of capitalism and the metropolitan model of Western modernity as a result of the European encounter with America, (2004: 7) I argued in the second chapter that the Latin American encounter with China and the writing of that encounter became a platform on which the adherence to that model, as the only possible one to invent a Latin American modernity, was gradually defied.

Part of this defiance stems from the fact that already in the nineteenth century the Old Continent started to appear as stalled and declining through descriptions of the journey to it as a commodified and conventionalized experience when contrasted with the journey to the Orient. The Orient was a place where the sun was newly rising and in which the Latin American could reinvent itself as a socio-economic project. An example of that was the first Peruvian diplomatic mission to the Qing empire led by

García y García since it had the ambition to give continuity to the exchanges that the colonial trade routes established. Through the import of Chinese labor, the Creole's imperial aspiration held the promise of an alternative foundational myth that could be rewritten through a direct transpacific connection with East Asia, displacing the Western powers from its center and therefore enabling a more favorable geopolitical position for Latin America in the race towards progression.

However, the Creole vision of China as a means for the advancement of their imperial ambitions will be gradually transformed throughout the travel writing of the twentieth century. The travel text becomes the space for the formation of images of China that moved further and further away from its representation merely as a means, to be repositioned as a fellow colonial subject together with it was possible to dismantle imperial schemes and build counter-hegemonic imaginaries of the future. The proposed reading of the travel narrative of the first half of the century showed how the fracturing of the Creole image of Latin America as a socio-economic project which resulted from the fragmentation of the Creole elite as a class, translated into the distancing from the rationalist model for the writing of the journey to China. That model, which prioritized the ambition to be objective by pushing the sensibility of the traveler to the margins of the narration was gradually defied. Hence, the travel writing becomes the space through which the travel writer renegotiates the position of their own subjectivity in the text.

Therefore, the more centered positioning that the traveling sensibility began to occupy in this period translated into a diametrically different vision of China. Over the course of this half a century, the image of it went from being a ruined and dynastic regime rooted in an anachronistic past, to represent a possible arena for the future spreading of the world socialist revolution. A crucial trigger for such a shift had to do with the fact that, following the encounter of the Latin American traveler with a China drowned in the miseries caused by war and occupation, it is in this period that the travel writer begins to be more acutely confronted with a crumbling imaginary on China, previously constructed through an essentialized and exoticized image of it tailored to suit the western orientalist discourse.

This gradual shift allowed the production of a travel text that, as a response, prioritized its aesthetic aspirations over its documentary obligations, opening wide the gateway for the flow of much more diversified and problematized images of China. As a result, China started to be repositioned in the Latin American imaginaries of global history and culture, and the territory that the Chinese aesthetic and cultural production came to occupy in the Latin American travel narrative expanded significantly. As I discussed in the third chapter, this rapprochement to China as a creator of alternative cultural and aesthetic products was the channel that paved the way to new paradigms for the Latin American cultural creation.

Moreover, the China-Latin America relation is also repositioned and progressively defined by a closer alignment of shared political aspirations, interested in distancing themselves from the liberal model of Western modernity since it was in both cases at the base of their historical struggles.

In this sense, although the analysis of the nineteenth century travel writing had already anticipated a problematic outline of the West, both in its geographical and discursive construction, the rise of Japan as an imperial power was a decisive factor in the reformulation of 'Western' in the Latin American travel writing of the first half of the twentieth century. This reformulation led to a much more critical approach to the Latin American connection with Euro-America. Consequently, since the travel writer began to see reflections of their own social and historical contexts in their encounter with China, the intention to interpret and narrate that encounter from a distinctively Latin American perspective gained momentum.

The aftermath of World War II and the geopolitical complexities that surfaced with the emergence of the Cold War imposed a planetary logic marked by a dividing radicalism. On the other hand, the triumph of the Chinese Communist Revolution and the interest of the newly founded PRC in strengthening ties with sympathizers and potential allies through a discourse propelled by peace, unity and solidarity unleashed a revolutionary enthusiasm in the Third World. A red utopia that longed to put an end to imperialism and the colonial paradigm that in the case of Latin America was followed by an acute suppression of the political counterweight that the emerging left-winged forces tried to voice.

The sum of these circumstances was reflected in a radical turnaround to the Latin American writing of this journey. To begin with, it should be noted that despite the paradigm shift that dominated, the comparative analysis proposed by this study through a more extensive time scope exposed the presence of a circular trajectory. Through it, the traveler of the second half of the twentieth century reinterprets and rekindles some of the elements that served as foundations for the subjectivity of the lettered Creole voyager. Among them are the aspiration for a global project capable of overcoming national, linguistic, and cultural barriers as well as a reinvigorated "quest for truth" accompanied by a duty to remain accountable while assuming the role of observer and interpreter as travel writer.

On the other hand, the study of the travel writing of this period contributed to the surfacing of new narratives that provide an alternative approach to the research on the Cold War. These accounts made visible the perspective of how it was experienced, interpreted and written from the interactions between latitudes which are traditionally erased from the metropolitan discourse. The presented analysis confirmed that the interest in the journey and the writing of the encounter with China during this part of the second half of the twentieth century was

especially notable among intellectual and artistic circles formed around political dissidences. However, the more comprehensive view offered by the gathered and studied corpus demonstrated the presence of a diverse and wide array not only of political voices but social sectors. They were represented through a more ample traveler profile that derived both in a much more elaborate and heterogeneous discursive construction of China and through it, also the writing of a Latin American cultural identity much more representative of its diversity.

Moreover, it also became clear that the ideological alignment with the Chinese revolutionary project was not necessarily translated into the absence of critical perspectives. In fact, beyond the solely political bond with China, the experience that this encounter represented for the Latin American travel writer also turned into seeing reflected its own diversity in the Chinese cultural and social complexities. Similarly, it allowed the journeyer from this period to re-dimension the global extent of its own colonial past through the historical recognition of the Chinese as fellow colonial subjects. Besides, this paradigm shift was mirrored in artistic and intellectual networks that provided alternatives to the hegemonic transatlantic transits since the travel writing was often presented as a space for the dismantling of the narrative of China fabricated around the Orientalist practice. By contrast, the reflection of their own realities in the realities that the traveler witnessed in China significantly shortened the space that the cultural breach used to occupy in the travel text.

To close, I would like to stress on the relevance that this study has for the understanding of the place that contemporary China occupies in the current geopolitical landscape. This research has given an account not only of how China has been historically imagined through travel writing from a Latin American perspective, but also of the important part that China has held in the construction of Latin America as a socio-cultural and economic project. This is an aspect that the disproportionate attention placed on the commercial and economic aspect of their exchanges has made even more invisible. These pages shed important light on the antecedents that have shaped the exchanges and tensions that define their contemporary relations, which makes them a relevant source for reflecting on and articulating the place from which Latin America envisions the future of this relation from a broader and more comprehensive stand.