



***Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture*, by Andrea Bachner. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. Hardback, 282 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-16452-8**

***The Politics of Chinese Language and Culture: The Art of Reading Dragons*, by Bob Hodge and Kam Louie. Routledge, 1998. Paperback, 208 pp. ISBN 1134691637**

One of the main elements—if not *the* element—that has sustained the myth of the continuity and unity of “Chinese civilization” for so long is its writing system, which has invested upon what we now call “China” and “Chinese culture” an aura of permanence and immutability that has constantly been used as an instrument to sustain very different ideas and desires by both Westerners and Chinese. Throughout the outstanding *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture*, Andrea Bachner brings forward the concept of “script politics” and, relying on a very original approach, lays bare the nuances and contradictions that question long-standing ideas characterized by cultural rigidity, while offering insight into a new way of approaching the study of Chinese cultural phenomena. Bachner does so by drawing on a wide range of theoretical resources for analysis, and a rich selection of cases and cultural manifestations—from calligraphy, photography, cinema and literature, to artistic happenings and installations, including mass choreographies—that stand as witnesses of the malleability and mutability of the Chinese script.

The book is divided into five chapters, followed by a programmatic conclusion. Each chapter revolves around a specific form of convergence between the script and different media and materialities that blooms into different points and perspectives of analysis, ultimately revealing the hybrid and dynamic nature of the “sinograph,” and its transformative potential.

The first chapter, which bears the title “Corpographies,” unleashes the exploration of the many operations of Chinese script politics through its materialization in bodies. When tied to national identity, this bodily script becomes a metaphor for China’s destiny. This was the general perception, Bachner shows, among Chinese intellectuals of the early 20th century, who considered the Chinese script as deadly flesh that threatened to infect the whole nation. In this chapter, we see how in their consideration of the writing system, Chinese intellectuals have swung between a hurt feeling of undeserved backwardness and a celebratory sense of pride and self-congratulation.

The second chapter, “Iconographies,” explores the complex relation between the Chinese script and visibility, and addresses the long-standing tendency to contemplate Chinese characters as a mimesis of realistic images. The chapter also provides an account of the re-negotiation of the mediality of writing in Western contexts at the turn of the 20th century, and of how the Chinese script was used as a reference within a process of re-negotiation by authors such as Fenollosa, in the case of poetry, or N. V. Lindsay in cinematic constructions. In this sense, it is especially stimulating to read about the use of Chinese characters in film theory by

authors such as Sergei Eisenstein. In his ideographic conception of *montage* (pp. 66-67), characters were not invested with an aura of immutability or a privileged link with reality, but were considered as a medium produced by historical and social circumstances. Bachner is quick to point out that many of these authors' contact with Chinese writing took place primarily through Japanese *kanji*, a fact that eloquently bespeaks the absence of cultural purity in writing itself.

The third chapter, "Sonographies," deals with the links between script and sonority, and the "silencing" of the Chinese script in its transcultural appropriations. Bachner shows how different authors neglected the oral aspect of Chinese writing, rendering it into a passive, voiceless guest in opposition to alphabetic, phonetic writing, a decision that underpins a clear-cut separation between writing and speech that has been foundational in much of modern linguistics. The second section of this chapter is concerned with "glossolalia," or the articulation of sounds that do not correspond to any established signifying system, providing an example of pure mediality devoid of meaning.

A similar operation is at work in the fifth chapter, "Allographies," which deals with the construction of "otherness within," that is, initiatives that render the Chinese script a stranger to itself. This is clearly exemplified in the works of Chinese writers from the diaspora, in which the systematicity and essentiality of the Chinese script is called into question at the very moment of the reassertion of a "Chinese essence": unable to escape from their hybrid condition, Chinese characters end up reversing the identity politics that these authors from the diaspora seek to reappraise. Thus, both identity and alterity are called into question, "rendered other to itself—or, rather, other to a hallucination of its univocal essence" (p. 146). The second section of the chapter dismantles binary oppositions and a presumed cultural sufficiency, by analyzing how punctuation marks—an import "from the outside"—interact with Chinese writing.

The fifth chapter, "Technologies," offers a panoramic view of the possibilities for interaction between Chinese script and new digital media, new medialities that are also perceived as a potential threat for the survival of Chinese writing. The chapter lingers on this tension between the need for adaptability and survival, and the nostalgia for essentialist cultural narratives, and ultimately points out that the only guarantee for the survival of the Chinese script depends on its capacity to mutate and adapt to new contexts, rather than remaining fossilized by any identity politics.

The conclusion of the book underlines the contradictions between the usage of the Chinese script as a carrier of national identity and its will to survive in the new digital context, where transcultural dissemination and reinterpretations abound. All this leads Bachner to put forward a new conception of Sinology: one that is sensitive to multiple positionalities and medialities, and thus opens hybrid spaces of concrete interactions that dismantle any ethnocentrism, be it in the form of Western Orientalisms, or in the form of claims of national essence; a practice of Sinology that renders "China" as "a phenomenon constructed by different discourses from different positions" (p. 215), and in which researchers acknowledge their active role and responsibility in the construction and configuration of "China."

In this sense, *Beyond Sinology* succeeds in providing a landscape that is refractory to any kind of compartmentalization, and showcases a wealth of bridges and hybrid contacts at a transnational scale. Bachner traces a genuinely transnational flow of ideas by calling in authors and sources from very diverse geopolitical locations (Latin America, Europe, Southeast Asia), and achieves the presentation of a truly transcultural space for the circulation of ideas and influences that heralds the renewed conception of Sinology and Cultural Studies revealed in her conclusions.

Among the wide range of concrete cases for analysis presented in *Beyond Sinology...*, it is strongly compelling to see Bachner engage with the works of some authors and artists by providing interpretations that sometimes go beyond the author's intentions. These multiple medial incarnations stand as witnesses to the malleability and mutability of the Chinese script, which, following Bachner's assertion, ultimately allow for the survival of the Chinese script—a powerful closing for a book that opens by talking about a deadly script that, in the end, finds a path to salvation through a necessary, alternative identity characterized by mutability.

When we talk about the “survival” of “Chinese” writing, though, aren't we necessarily implying the continuity, or, even better, the illusion of continuity provided by a specific narrative of cultural and identity politics? The gap between the *jiaguwen* script in the oracle bones (14th to 10th centuries BCE) and the contemporary simplified characters is as large as the gap, let's say, between Phoenician script and the Latin script that this very text uses. However, while both *jiaguwen* and simplified characters are both labeled as “Chinese script,” the same convergence does not occur in the case of the Phoenician and Latin scripts. Paradoxically, then, it might seem that the survival of the “Chinese” script as such depends as much on the survival of a certain narrative of continuity as on its capacity to adapt and mutate. In this sense, as Bachner herself notes in the conclusion (p. 216), even the term “sinograph,” used widely throughout the book, becomes problematic, since it conveys an essential link between script and identity that *Beyond Sinology* authoritatively contests.

Another compelling point of the book is the description of how Chinese script has been reduced, among many Western intellectuals, to a “philosophical machine of difference.” This machine has been used to produce metaphorical and comparative structures that prove the “loss of things in the hands of signification,” and the relativity of all construction of knowledge in Western thought. In their quest to reveal the constructed nature of ideas, prominent authors such as Derrida, Kristeva or Foucault seem to have halted the impulse of their inquiry at the gates of “the Other,” thus leaving the realm of “otherness” untouched, rendering it, once again, a passive object, a “cultural other” that acts as a catalyst for reassessing the ultimate object of their criticism—Western thought and metaphysics. This omission is present even in some of the most radical analyses: such is the resiliency of the fascination with the “otherness” of things Chinese, which continue to vest in Western minds a “mainstay” of permanence, a hallucinating fetish that is gently spared any kind of harsh deconstruction inasmuch as it helps understand the pitfalls of Western thought. Besides, we could also ask, in light of the insistent and prevalent use of the “sinograph” by Western poets, thinkers or artists, to what extent the Chinese script became a carrier of symbolic capital, an adornment to “show off” among authors and intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century.

Thanks to both its subject and its programmatic intentions, *Beyond Sinology...* can be read next to the earlier *The Politics of Chinese Language and Culture: The Art of Reading Dragons*, by Bob Hodge and Kam Louie. The contrast between the two works is interesting insofar as it heralds some of the latest developments around Cultural and Media Studies. Rather than questioning the value of the earlier book, the comparison is intended to offer a contrast to envision the path of disciplinary development, a path along which Hodge and Louie's book occupies a remarkable place.

As in the case of *Beyond Sinology...*, the authors of *The Politics of Chinese Language and Culture...* were already well aware that "taxonomies are not expected to be tidy, static sets of boxes," but rather "dynamic, inconsistent and open-ended." Hodge and Louie promptly pointed to the increasing fuzziness of "Chineseness" and national identities, and were concerned with how meaning about China is generated in multiple sites. In this sense, *The Politics of Chinese Language and Culture...* presented Sinology as outdated, a colonial antique fated to live only behind the glass of the museum of knowledge. In contrast, Bachner brings the term Sinology back to life and infuses it with new transformative potential. Whereas Hodge and Louie's book concentrates on dismantling Eurocentric assumptions about China as held in older Sinology, Bachner's work tackles with equal impetus both Eurocentrism and its reverse—Sinocentrism.

The Politics of Chinese Language and Culture... concentrates on separate, compartmentalized paradigms and themes, placing special emphasis on connections with power structures. This mode of operating offers a well-focused understanding, as in the case of the outstanding gender-oriented analysis of Chinese script in Chapter 3. In contrast, the focus of *Beyond Sinology...* is not on compartmentalized themes, but on the interfaces and material incarnations themselves, thus allowing the blooming of wider, transversal frames for analysis that provide a more cumulative understanding of these representations. Moreover, while the cases analyzed in *The Politics of Chinese Language and Culture...* tend to be mainly "intra-Chinese," Bachner provides examples of performances of the Chinese script in different locations and languages. This approach created a compelling account of how the proliferation of medialities constantly generates potential ambivalences and challenges power relations, and provides a glimpse into the capacity for change and transformation even within those specific performances.

Hodge and Louie illuminated a way to free Cultural and Chinese Studies of the burden of deterministic, orientalist assumptions. In the same vein, given the scope and transcultural multiplicity of its references and programmatic conclusions, *Beyond Sinology...* is an ambitious, coherent, and outstanding study that brilliantly heralds the way toward a more complex analysis of cultural phenomena, attentive to overlapping and intertwined dynamics beyond compartments and binaries. It therefore leaves the doors wide open for a timely and much-needed new way to approach "China" and "Chinese culture" as objects of inquiry.