BOOK REVIEWS

Sinographies: Writing China.
By Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy, and Steven G. Yao, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. Pp. 408. ISBN 10: 0816647240; 13: 978-0816647248.
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Sinographies contains within its pages a wide array of theoretical explorations, literary critical elucidations, textual studies, historical investigations, and personal ruminations of what it means to write "China" and "Chineseness". The China that emerges from these pages is plural not primarily because of differences in political and cultural geography, but mostly because of the contributors' shared interest in the processes through which the meanings of "China" and "Chineseness" are produced. The starting point is that "China is written," not in the sense of a text to be deciphered, but rather of a writing process: "'China' is not something one thinks about but something one thinks through" (xi).

The neologism plays off the more established, albeit contested, term "sinology". The editors do not engage in questioning the academic field by that name, but they note that they envision the relationship between the new field and that of sinology (also rendered "Chinese Studies", even though both terms carry different connotations in methodology) as one structurally equivalent to the relationship between historiography and history. To what extent the contributors are successful in fulfilling the ambition implicit in this parallel will be taken up near the end of the review. Its import is clear, however: whereas sinology may be situated in the genealogy of philology, and thus aims to explicate the meaning of Chinese texts and artifacts by relying on linguistic and textual evidence, sinography is the critical analysis of the cultural production of "China" transnationally and translingually.

The editors' more immediate objectives in this volume are to underscore sinography's engagement with broader contemporary questions about translation, subaltern subjectivity and the value of writing (xii). More precisely, they justify their enterprise by underscoring that these problems are directly constituted by sinographical practices, and thus their elucidation requires sinography. The quintuple division of the fourteen essays contained in *Sinographies* fails to capture their significance. The editors use a combination of thematic (language and rhetoric, minority discourses and immigration), chronological (early modern cultural production), and genre (reportage) or media (mediated externalities) categories, but neither they nor the authors articulate the rationale of these groupings, collective questions or conclusions. Hence I will discuss the papers in different configurations, highlighting the synergies that are created around translation, encounter and subaltern subjectivity.

The essays treating translation processes demonstrate that both source and translated texts are unstable, subject to ongoing transformation, invention and negation. Haun Saussy shows how Victor Segalen's invented Chinese stele inscriptions are source texts in *Stèles*, an interlingual collection of prose poems. *Stèles* features brief inscriptions in Chinese and longer "translations" of the steles in French. The translations are inventions that, by mimicking features of stele texts and other types of inscriptions, make an implicit claim to explicate the essential meaning of the genre, and through it, the essential immobility of Chineseness. Saussy's essay further illustrates how cheap reproduction (the use of typography for the French text and the reproduction of images for Chinese signs) further enhanced the polarity between the materiality of the inscribed Chinese sign and the interpretive flow of the French text produced in this interlingual collection. Timothy Billings introduces the concept of

"untranslation" in his analysis of Jesuit translations of the so-called "Nestorian stele" which was uncovered around 1625. Through a close comparison of the stele text and its Jesuit translations Billings restores the multiplex readings embedded in the language of the text as well as in its translations. This reconstruction of the polyvocality of the "Daoist-Confucian-Buddhist-Nestorian stele" (p. 94) at once exposes the processes by which Jesuit translators wrote themselves and their project on the basis of the "Other's Other" (p. 93). Strategies of untranslation are deployed to construct normative readings of a source text and render invisible incompatible elements.

In an essay on three contemporary adaptations of the sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West*, Carlos Rojas teases out the tensions embedded in translations of traditional literature among literary producers and consumers who are negotiating traditional (Chinese) cultural identities on the margins of China (in Hong Kong, Japan and the US). Adaptations in various media of the story of Monkey who, as a Chinese traveler in search of Indian Buddhist scriptures, symbolizes the trajectories of translation, at once borrow and undermine the authority of the traditional novel. As "treacherous translations" and fragmentary adaptations they reflect in Rojas' reading the fractured existence of Chinese identity and the transformation of traditional Chineseness in a transnational cultural sphere.

The impact of marginality on the transformation of traditional genres and on the translation of modernity is explored in more detail by Steven G. Yao and Steven J. Venturino. Yao's essay exposes the irony that just as elite modernist writers in mainland China moved away from classical genres of poetry in the first decades of the twentieth century, migrant workers locked away in holding facilities on Angel Island inscribed their frustrations about and hopes for their host country in classical genres of Chinese poetry on the walls that separated them from American society. While these poems are Chinese, they are also transnational literary products that, like jazz music, acquire different social and cultural meanings as traditional forms are reshaped in new settings. Similarly seeking inspiration in Afro-American cultural production and theory, Venturino investigates ways in which Tibetan discursive strategies destabilize hegemonic Han Chinese ethnic and political narratives. For example, even though traditional forms of love poems were banned during the Cultural Revolution, Tibetan schoolchildren continued to use them in courtship, but inserted Chinese revolutionary discourse to avoid censure. The love poems could be read as instances of the assimilation of Chinese revolutionary rhetoric, but equally undermined the logic of that rhetoric for Tibetans decoding the lines as traditional expressions of love.

Marginality of a different kind is directly associated with what Rey Chow diagnoses as the "core of cultural authenticity" (p. 372) in Chang Eileen's "Red Rose and White Rose". In an engaging essay that is otherwise only tangentially related to the core questions raised by the volume's editors, Chow argues that the serialization of women (White Rose and Red Rose) in the portrayal of the male protagonist's family and love lives, and the shocking images of the woman in atypical scenes (constipated on the toilet), shatter the metaphor (and moral value) of woman. In Chow's reading the author thereby also exposes the sexism that sustains a "Chineseness" in which female virtue provides a safe haven for men lost in modernity.

Most of the essays illustrate that the production of meaning is not a one-directional process whereby subjects create interpretations or invent images of Chinese language, texts, geography, mindsets, aesthetics, governance, cultural authenticity, minorities and ethnicity. They instead highlight the transformative impact that defining the other has on the subject and its culture. Sinography turns into biography and autobiography. Transformation is at work in different types of encounters: personal accounts, non-coercive cross-cultural contacts, and imperialist narratives. The interaction between the description of the other and the self on a personal scale is evinced in Lucien Miller's reminiscences about his anthropological work on the Bai minority. Miller describes his fieldwork as "serious fiction" in which the study of the other changes both self and other. As a Catholic deacon, he transforms the alterity of the Bai and their "Chinese" environment into pointers to a

transcendental God. Personal religious identity was similarly redefined through the encounter with the Chinese written language in the case of the French politician and writer Paul Claudel. Saving "the Chinese sign" from the orientalism of Imagist poets, Claudel translated Chinese poetics into an allegory of the abysm that separates Being and beings. Less sympathetically, Gordon Mackay turned his museum of Formosa into a display case of "native savagery and paganism" whose artifacts served, in part, to exorcise those evils. As Henk Vynckier's essay shows, this museum and its founder are now retranslated in Taiwan as the forebears of "Taiwan consciousness".

Allegories of a political kind motivate the sinographies examined in the essays by Eric Hayot, Danielle Glassmeyer, Walter S. H. Lim, and Timothy Kendall. Hayot and Glassmeyer examine opposite constructions of Chinese and Asian essences in American media: the Yellow Peril on the one hand, and on the other, childlikeness. In Hayot's critical readings science fiction novels and games articulate with political anxieties about the future of the US. In popular media, references to traditional negative stereotypes overdetermine the meaning of Chinese technological development so that the future of China and its relation to technology is defined by the reification of the strategic cunning of classical philosophers. This type of what I would call strategic orientalism is also echoed in the captivity narrative of the Australian journalist Francis James examined in Kendall's essay. In this case oriental despotism spills from the realm of governance into the personal world as "brainwashing" (or the western conceptualization thereof) becomes a threat to the maintenance of self-identity. The sentimental orientalism of Tom Dooley, US navy doctor and writer, can perhaps be seen as a supplement to such fashioning of China and the self. It draws on the same characterizations of Chineseness (timeless, relentless, and confident about triumph; p. 163), but zooms in on the innocent and educable majority, Asia's "children". This vision of the other advocates American paternalism (or rather maternalism) as the best strategy of self-identification.

The remaining two essays allow us to question the impact of colonial ambitions on early modern constructions of China and Chineseness. In Milton's *Paradise Lost* and in William Chambers's treatises on civil architecture and oriental gardens Lim and David Porter find reflections of the experience of the other and traces of its impact on the imagination of the British political and natural landscape. However, both caution against teleological readings. Porter in particular sets out to examine how encounter and translation were primarily mediated by personal affective and cognitive disorientation in the face of radical alterity before colonialism.

The encounters described in the essays surveyed above mostly involve non-native subjects; in the two cases that feature native subjects (Chang Eileen and the Angel Island poets) we are dealing with transnational subjects. This emphasis invites questions such as how the processes, formative and transformative, in writing China and the self analysed here compare to the writing of China and Chineseness among native writers more broadly, and how writing "the west" has transformed Chinese selves. In interaction with such comparative questions, the systematic investigation of the "conditions, assumptions, and logic" (vii) of writing China may indeed contribute towards a better understanding of the cross-cultural writing of self and other. The greatest strength of this volume is its collection of compelling cases and broad vistas of sinographic practice. Its principal weakness is the minimalist introduction, and especially, the lack of a broader contextualization of the theoretical and methodological ambitions of sinography. If sinography continues to aspire to the status of historiography, sinographers will have to reflect on shared narrative strategies, relationships among sinographic practices, the histories and critiques of sinographic methods and schools, and more. In this regard, the volume should be read, in the editors' words, as "an essay, a trying or attempt that clears new and unexpected ground for comparative work" (xii).