

Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media*, OUP USA, 2010, 202pp., £32.50, 978 0 19 539382 8

This book begins three times, since there is a Prologue and an Introduction before the book proper. The Prologue, and thus the whole book, begins (after a couple of epigraphs from Barthes and Benjamin) by quoting a celebrated paragraph from Kafka, about China, or 'China' (a fundamental distinction in Bush's book). It describes a messenger from the Emperor, who is on a never-to-be-completed journey to 'you', the reader. If this message were ever to reach the intended recipient the Emperor would have been long dead, and the message redundant. It is a typically Kafkaesque scenario (the bureaucracy, the never-ending complexity of bewildering obstacles to 'getting through', the final hopelessness and pointlessness of ever doing so), but one which also conforms to or expresses some of the stereotypes long applied to China in the West (likewise the bureaucracy – or *mandarinism* – the despotic empire, the mystery).

In fact there have been Christian missionaries to China who did not find it impossible to know China: Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit missionary in the eighteenth century to the court of Wanli dressed as a Chinese, spent ten years learning the language before writing books in it, and earned the praise of his Chinese fellow-scholars who said that he understood traditional Chinese culture better than they. Presumably his conception of Chinese written characters was superior by far to that of any of the modernists Bush discusses (he does mention Ricci briefly). Another book, *Faith of our Fathers*, is a revealing discussion of Chinese traditional culture, from the point of view of a Chinese Christian, and includes a fascinating section on Ricci.¹

Bush's book ends with a reference back to the same story by Kafka, the story of a journey that never ends, a the message that is never delivered, for

The dream 'you' dream in Kafka's parable is that the Imperial Messenger is still – 'even now' or 'always still' – fighting his way through the inner chamber of the imperial palace. In reality the news is not that China is 'now' in the world. The news is that it always has been and that 'we' have known this for a very long time and that the forms of knowing and unknowing in which we have simultaneously acknowledged and denied this fact ... are increasingly unequal to the task of defining 'us'. The wish that this dream fulfills is that China has not yet arrived. That is the message that is always still on its way to 'you', even now (p 149).

In other words, 'the medium is the message', and towards the end of his book Bush quotes from and discusses Marshall McLuhan's literary theory. Bush explores Kafka's biographical connections with China, as well as the uses to which he puts his 'imaginary' of 'China', and its relation to other historical imaginaries of China in the West – as he does with each of the

¹ Chan Kei Thong, *Faith of our Fathers*, China Publishing Group Orient, 2005.

modernist writers he discusses.

In between these 'framing' references to Kafka, Bush takes us through extremely interesting, often brilliant analyses of some writings by such modernists as Pound, Mallarmé, Claudel, Victor Segalen (a French poet living in China who published privately a volume of prose poems *Stèles* in 1912), Benjamin, Valéry – not to mention philosophers and theorists from Plato to Heidegger and Derrida.

The Introduction, after a quote from Hegel, begins with the bold statement that the ideograph, far from being an ancient, Chinese form of writing as people suppose, is 'a modern western invention'. It is indeed modernism's idea of China and of Chinese writing that Bush is concerned with.

After the Prologue and Introduction, the first chapter of the book proper begins with a discussion of Ezra Pound, focusing especially on 'In a Station of the Metro':

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Ezra Pound, the modernist most famously associated with Chinese writing, who died in 1972 aged eighty-seven, was by the 1950s making serious efforts to learn the language, both spoken and written, with the help of Chinese friends who themselves were scholars. Pound had consulted with Chinese friends from the beginning, when he was writing 'Cathay' (an alternative name for China). So, although when he wrote that poem he could not read Chinese and relied on Fenellosa's (unreliable) glossary, it is clear that his engagement with Chinese was a serious, lifelong business. A recent book comprises letters to and from Pound's Chinese friends, and with interesting introductions has been published recently by OUP.²

Bush's concern is with the modernists' references to and citations of China, or more especially 'China' – their 'imaginary' of China, (which does not mean that their 'China' was merely imaginary, as he points out), and in particular of Chinese characters, the 'ideographs' of the title. He is not concerned with what Chinese characters *are* (a difficult, contested question), but with what they mean to the West, and specifically with what they, and 'China', meant to the modernists. The present reader found the book stimulated him to want to understand Chinese writing itself better, not just modernism.

One thinks of McLuhan, reading that

The ideograph is ... a figure of mediation.... Historically, then, the ideograph was intimately connected with the question of media.

Bush affirms that he will build the case for this connection throughout

² Zhaoming Qian (ed.), *Ezra Pound's Chinese Friends*, OUP, 2008.

the book, and indeed he does. The 'China' of modernist writers had an intimate connection with their idea of and response to technology, for which China and its writing even became a sort of complex figure. Bush shows that China, or rather 'China', has been intimately concerned with Western modernism's critique, interpretation and analysis of the West – almost as if 'China' were a literary / cultural theory in itself. He ties this to the modernist obsession with 'media' (the technological media of phonography and photography as well as the medium of language), as well as to its obsession with primitivism, of recovering a kind of innocence, or, naive eye supposedly uncorrupted, unsophisticated.

Bush writes that 'the ideograph ... figures ... language approaching the condition of photography.' He explains, a page later:

The photograph and ideograph are equally unconcerned with the continued reality of either what they show or what looks at them. Like the photograph, the ideograph renders not an instant of consciousness but an instant rather than consciousness. It is in this sense, I have been arguing, that the ideograph figures language approaching the condition of photography. (p 58)

As Gertrude Stein said delightfully (quoted by Bush): 'In China there is no need of China, because in China china is china.' This focuses our minds on the difference between China and 'China', as well as on the porcelain (another medium, of course) which for the West represents 'China', to the extent that it is the original source of china. In the West, china (porcelain) is part of our 'imaginary' of China. Bush:

for modernism, the ideograph figured not simply a different writing system, but a point of entry into a radically other worldview. As Pound would later write: "The ideograph is a door into a different modality of thought." (p 15)

Bush asks:

How did an emblem of cultural stagnation become a model of literary modernity? (p 32)

He writes:

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Chinese came more and more to be understood as a historically and conceptually primitive language, with the key piece of evidence being the cumbersome writing system that was said to bind the Chinese to the sensuous particular and to hinder the development of abstract and individual – let alone modern – thought. (p 18)

This perhaps imperialist view gave way; as Bush writes:

The topos of Oriental writing (both the ideograph and the hieroglyph) would help formulate many of the central concepts of modernity: the commodity (Marx), the dream (Freud), the cinematic and poetic image (Eisenstein, Pound), the allegorical sign (Benjamin), theatrical gesture (Mallarmé, Artaud), and the enigmatic and

ideological character of modern experience (Kracauer, Adorno), to cite some of the most prominent examples (p 19).

The section on Claudel is fascinating. Bush takes his approach to the ideograph as a 're-reading' of the Poundian tradition. He tells us that Claudel (with his example of the character for 'eternity') 'presents Chinese writing as the transformation of transitory phenomena into signs of eternity'. He calls Claudel's 'the religion of the sign', and contrasts him with Pound, saying that 'while the complexities of Imagist poetics emerge from its approach to the instant, those of Claudel emerge from its relationship to the eternal.' Thus Bush points to the two streams of modernism: Imagism, represented especially by Pound, and the Symbolism of Mallarmé and Claudel (and probably Stevens), which are parallel responses.

Bush implies that Claudel identified the East, spiritually, with Buddhism, and Bush himself seems to do so. Yet both Taoism and Confucianism are more indigenous to China than is Buddhism, and Chen Kai Thong would have them quite arguably compatible with the Bible, with Christianity. Bush says that for Claudel, what China needed was 'salvation'. He discusses the Chinese character represented by 'Shi' (complete). This character is '+', which is, 'pictographically' or at least pictorially, a cross. To read this as *the* Cross (of Christ) as Claudel apparently did, need not be considered tendentious, as Bush seems to think – at least not for a Christian, which Claudel was. Bush calls Claudel's interpretation (or, spiritualization) an 'emptying out of conventional meaning'; but surely, since the conventional meaning of '+' includes 'complete, perfect', Claudel is simply actually reading in his own supplementary Christian meaning reference to 'Christ.' This book is a brilliant contribution to our understanding of modernism, especially in its relation to China.

Bill Goldman

永恒

Yong heng, 'Eternity'.

十全十美

Shi quan shi mei, 'Perfect in every way'.

(Simplified Chinese.)

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