

Does China exist?

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Synopsis

Does China exist? One would assume that this question has a simple answer - yes, of course it does exist; an answer that all of us would more than likely jump to without a second thought. However, by looking at various sources and taking into account some key arguments the question of the existence of China and what form that takes to the individual can be scrutinised.

If we haven't been somewhere, does it mean it doesn't exist to us in the way that it exists to someone who actually lives in that place? Can I, having not been to China, actually disbelieve in its existence? And is my secondary and tertiary research and experience of it enough information for me to believe in this notion of China?

This essay shall, amongst other things, take Barthes text titled, The Death Of The Author and analyse it and the notion of China using some of the key theory brought up in the text. This essay will also examine the relationship between China and Chinatown for the individual.

Introduction

Does China exist? Before even attempting to answer this, it is first of all important to point out an underlying fundamental of this discussion. It is not I as an author of this text who is informing the reader of the existence of China nor is it me who is telling the reader what to think. This essay made up of a collection of letters and words shall prompt you, the reader, to seriously consider this question and to examine your view on China and its existence. In the collective conscience, it is the country of origin for many people and a place of intrigue for many more. This essay shall question the existence of this perhaps fictional place that we know of as China. What we know and how we know it will also be explored when examining this subject.

Do you not agree that we all know of China in one form or another? Having said that I came across a quote whilst searching an Internet forum on the subject that stated,

“I'm guessing since 50% of my fellow Americans probably can't point to China on a map it just might not exist.”¹

¹ Posted by Vaal Satori on Sep 29 2007 at 3.25am on the Cyber Nations Forum
<http://forums.cybernations.net/index.php?showtopic=3406>

And would it not be fair to say that for many of us, we have never visited China and probably won't either. Yet how can we know what we think of as China, is really an accurate portrayal of the actual place and not simply an imagined fiction. That is if there even is an actual place.

Was China ever in existence? Has it died? Can we consider China to be alive? Could China be a city? These questions all pose interesting answers when we look at what knowledge is and how we know it is knowledge and not simply something to be dismissed as ludicrous. It could be said that it is in existence, as we all have a believed knowledge of what China is to our surroundings and us. So for some then, it would not be dead, it would be seen or believed to be alive. However on the other hand if you haven't experienced what the real China is in any form, be it in the physical as a country or China as a concept, then how can it exist for that individual?

Is Chinatown the replication of China or have we, who have yet to visit China, let our imaginations run away with ourselves? Have we created this fictional imagined China? Does Chinatown play an important role in this imagined place and what do the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes have to add to this

discussion. Do we no longer have a concept of the real or do we simply believe everything as a given?

Is our collective experience of China nothing more than the negotiation, of an attempted documentation, of a constantly changing concept? What role does the map play in this portrayal of China and what about China as a text if we are to use Roland Barthes definition of what a text is? This essay will look at the theories laid out in Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' and analyse China and Chinatown by use of this thought process and arguing if it is fair to do so. Does Barthes imply that there is no author of a text such as Chinatown and could that then be related to the country of origin also? So when looking at ancient Chinese artefacts could they have no relevant author and no relevant origin to the reader? Is this authorship purely created by the reader who interprets the artefact based on their personal understanding of the Chinese culture and of course referencing back to the individual's own resident culture?

Analysis of The Death Of The Author

The original title and source for The Death of The Author was: 'La mort de l'auteur', Mantéia V, 1968. This essay

uses the translated version by Stephen Heath in the book 'Image, Music, Text.' This is a pivotal essay when analysing texts and makes statements that are still considered highly relevant today almost forty years after it was initially written.

In the essay by Barthes he uses the term 'text' to be anything that is created by an author, be it written words, music, a tennis ball or a house. Barthes talks about the role of the author in creating the text and then the intended reader of that text.

Barthes discusses narrative, writing about ethnographic societies using the Shaman as a reference. He says that you may admire their mastery of the performative narrative code but never their "genius". The point Barthes was to imply is that you may appreciate a Shaman for the ability to interpret and pass on the narrative as handed down by generation but never at their genius for the narrative. The narrative more than likely transcended the performer and would have been taken from past generations and been rooted deep within the Shaman culture. Therefore meaning that the performer is simply a container that acts out narrative. This does not dismiss the performer but simply deconstructs and erodes the performer as author. We need not know of the life of the

performer in order to understand the narrative put forward.

A text is not too dissimilar from the Shaman performer, as a text is in essence the performer in that it is the container in which the narrative of that text is passed on. The text takes words rooted in language and reorders or acts them out into another form that is then passed onto the reader. The reader in that instance does not need the author of the text to understand it but simply their knowledge of language and ability to put the words into context.

When the role between the author and the reader is examined Barthes attempts to scrutinise the author's role in the experience of the text or more the importance of that text's relation to the reader. He mentions the modern day author and discusses how this idea of authorship has come about in the contemporary society through the newly found prestige of the individual. He attempts to loosen the power of this modern day author by saying,

“Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as I in nothing other than the instance saying I: language knows a ‘subject’, not a

'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it."²

The modern author is never more than the writing, within which the individual is not known other than that of the subject. By using this quote would it be possible to understand China by its theory if we take China to be the author? Could it be said that China is nothing more than that, China. A title under which texts are attributed, which in turn holds together this concept of China, which in turn exhausts it. Could it be understood that China is the collective author of Chinese texts, which then makes China as an author exhausted in favour of the reader?

When we think of the author and how an author exists, it is split into two states of existence, before and after the text. The author is born before the text and lives breathes and pains before the text was brought into existence. The text then takes on the role of the after: the result of this suffering. Whereas the new 'scripter' is born simultaneously with the text. This modern day 'scripter' does not have to worry about polishing his

² Barthes, Roland (1977) *Image Music Text*, essay selection and translation by Heath, Stephen, London: Fontana Press.

form and as Barthes writes, the modern day 'scripter' cut off from any voice has a:

"...Pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression) traces a field without origin- or which, at least has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins."³

This quote is an example of the way Barthes thinks about the modern day 'scripter' - that he is somewhat free from the voice of the author figure and almost free to experiment with language without fear of ruining the authors polished form. That is to say that this modern author has no need to worry about what precedes the text. For this modern day 'scripter' it would be impractical to write out with the understandings of their culture. We know that a text is not a string of words that simply unlocks a single meaning through use of language. It is a complex thing that references other texts, as every text is a product of intertextuality. Barthes would argue that in fact a text is not original at all, it is a blend of words taken from the innumerable centres of culture, the culture that we as the reader use to understand such text. No text is original. Yet with the modern day

³ Barthes, Roland (1977) *Image Music Text*, essay selection and translation by Heath, Stephen, London: Fontana Press.

'scripter' the text is made up of a mix of words that come from language, thus meaning that any text cannot be deciphered merely disentangled.

This is the same with China. You cannot understand it without your cultural references that you associate with the place called China. Everything you know about China is based on your memory of artefacts and encounters with Chinese residents, unless that is you have visited the country China in which case you have a personal account of the place. I would argue though that for a person who has visited China they have not experienced all of China and therefore can only do so by looking from the outside in.

Reverting back to Barthes, the ideas of language show a shift from thinking about the author as having relevance to the meaning of a text, to the thinking that a text can be detangled using language to understand it better. Barthes says,

"...A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."⁴

⁴ Barthes, Roland (1977) *Image Music Text*, essay selection and translation by Heath, Stephen, London: Fontana Press.

It is the reader who holds together the text without losing any of the meanings of quotations or cultural references. The text stops being about the past and is in turn transformed into the present by the reader.

Taking this idea that a text's unity lies not in its origin plays well into the concept that for some at least, China does not exist as China according to our collective viewpoint. We, as onlookers create China and hold it together as a concept by referencing other texts. This is where Barthes put forward the main point in his argument that,

“The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.”⁵

This statement has greatly helped the understanding of how we interpret a text. We can choose not to look at it with the eyes of the author and instead look at a text with a fresh language-based approach. Likewise we should be able to look at a country with a fresh set of eyes and experience it not as given and perhaps bend the rules of what is and isn't accepted.

⁵ Barthes, Roland (1977) *Image Music Text*, essay selection and translation by Heath, Stephen, London: Fontana Press.

China as a text

Is it not a feasible argument to put forward the idea of China as a text as understood by Barthes? If we are able to do this it poses two key points; that there is an author and that there is a reader. If we are to look at the author and who might fit that role we could assume that it is the people of China who are the author of it. In the same way as a writer is the author of a text, the Chinese are arguably the author of the country China. If we go back to Barthes and look at the Quote;

“Writing is the neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing.”

If we are to analyse this quote, we are able to create for ourselves a more self-destructive interpretation of what China is as a text. Thinking of China as an entity with a loss of, or more a diluted identity is only to reinforce the idea that China as an author acts to exhaust itself. How China gathers an existence then turns away from itself onto the reader of the text. The unity

of China as a text is not in its origin but more the destination, the reader.

Looking beyond Barthes for a moment to Julie Kristeva, we can use her notions of Intertextuality as a means of understanding the text further. She too makes the point that everything, be it a book, a photograph, an apple or a tree is a text, something that can be read and deciphered. She also goes on to say that each text is linked to every other text and that a text is made up of a mosaic of quotes. She charts this in a three-dimensional space to visualise the process. Leading us to the conclusion that nothing is ever unique or original. If we can use the idea that a text is never unique and apply it to China as a text we can conclude that it exists in various other forms. What does this imply for China? Could it be put forward that China is itself a representation just as Chinatown is?

Representations by nature reference back to the original. This is another evidence of intertextuality. Intertextuality in its simplest form can be seen in the footnotes and bibliography of this essay. I as the author have been influenced by these texts and have shown that influence in the writing and direct quotations from those sources. You as the intended reader have brought with you

your own set of read texts that will influence you as you read this. You bring with you your own texts. When looking back at China as an outsider to the culture the reading of the cultural imagery is a different experience as the outsider will not have been as exposed to many of the texts that exist in the Chinese culture. The viewer of such a text already has a collection of knowledge that they bring with them and use in understanding text.

We know that Barthes is influenced by Kristeva as in the book *Desire In Language*, Roland Barthes is quoted on the back page as commenting about Julia Kristeva. The quote reads,

‘Julia Kristeva changes the places of things: she always destroys the latest preconception, the one we thought we could be comforted by, the one of which we could be proud...’⁶

The quote is an admission by Barthes to the direct influence of Kristeva. This admission is an awareness of her existence. When looking back at the question *Does China Exist?* In the very title there is an admission of the existence of China in one form or another. This I

⁶ Kristeva, Julia (1987) *Desire in language, a semiotic approach to literature and art*, Worcester: Billing and Sons Ltd.

would argue applies only to the collective knowledge that we share. For those reading this essay that have never had knowing contact with what China is, as either concept or place, simply know of China as the collected letters in the word China.

When looking at China as a text, the reader brings with them their individual cultural and learned knowledge. The ability to create words with the letters on the page and then to interoperate these based on their understanding of those words is where their role takes over from the author. The author still has the role of author, albeit a self-exhausting role, in the production and creation of China as a text. However the reader has the role of taking that text and interoperating China in the contemporary instant. Empowering the reader in the act. So can we now ask the question of who creates China and come to the conclusion that we, the reader, create China from the collective knowledge already known?

The question Does China Exist? Is still a valid question even though we have come to the conclusion that China exists for the collective it is to the individual 'reader' that the question has no decisive answer. The reader could be one of two extremes (or somewhere in between). They may know nothing about China, however the

reader may be a resident in a place called China. Either way, it is the reader's knowledge that is brought with them when analysing the text that makes the questions answer less certain.

For the reader who has never been to China in the physical, Chinatown could be seen to be the next best thing or could it be nothing more than a replication of a replication? Where is the truth behind what we perceive to be replicated? If we are to look at this quote as taken from the *Simulations* book,

“The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth- it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.”⁷

It suggests that there is no need to look beyond the simulacrum in order to find a truth to it, as it is truth. Can there be no reality to the origins of the reproduced? How viable is the argument that you could be in China if you are in Chinatown? Does this subculture within cultures create a misguided vision of that which it is representing? Is Chinatown part of China or are we confusing the two? These question all demand answers. I

⁷ Ecclesiastes as quoted in *Simulations*, Baudrillard, Jean, (1983) *Semiotext(e)* and Jean Baudrillard

would argue that you might be in China if you are in Chinatown as you are surrounded by a subculture that in China would be more familiar than that of a western culture. You are not however in the defined landmass of China. You are out with that boundary and exist in a flux between China, Chinatown and then the surrounding dominant culture.

The Chinese experience of China would be arguably different from the western idea of China. When looking at texts that examine the city and subculture, and the existence of the city as a living evolving entity, the author Robert E. Park puts forward the notion of the city as,

“...Something more than a congeries of individual men and of social conveniences- streets, buildings, electric lights, tramways, and telephones, etc.; something more, also, than a mere constellation of institutions and administrative devices- courts, hospitals, schools, police, and civil functionaries of various sorts. The city is, rather a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organised attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is

involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature. [...]”⁸

This quote puts forward the notion that the city is not a mere human construction but one of nature and particularly human nature. It also suggests the city as a state of mind. This is perhaps where the argument gets confused with this idea of Chinatown and China. In the collective mindset China is a Country or concept while Chinatown is a subculture in an established city. Both share elements of one and other yet both have their differences. If we view them both as texts they reference each other so closely that you perhaps could be mistaken for being in China whilst in Chinatown.

I would put forward that Chinatown is a condensed version of China for groups of like-minded individuals that find themselves in a certain geographic location. The fact it is a town within a larger city adds to the imagined China to the reader who doesn't ever visit China. Park also writes

⁸ Park, Robert, E. (1925) 'The city: suggestions for the investigation of human behavior in the urban environment'

“Because of the opportunity it offers, particularly to the exceptional and abnormal types of man, a great city tends to spread out and lay bare to the public view in a massive manner all the human characters and traits which are ordinarily obscured and suppressed in smaller communities. The city, in short, shows the good and evil in human nature in excess.”⁹

This quote emphasises the way in which a city can lay bare all manner of types of normally hidden traits. Chinatown would act as a core around which all this activity would go on. Thus adding another layer of perception to the reader who has no first hand knowledge of China. Like Chinatown, the products produced by China are texts that add to the tangled web of intertextuality. Chinese products act to mystify China.

The map

“...It is the map that engenders the territory...”¹⁰

This quote is taken from *Simulations* book in which Baudrillard puts forth his theories on simulations. Just

⁹ Park, Robert, E. (1925) 'The city: suggestions for the investigation of human behavior in the urban environment'

¹⁰ *Simulations*, Baudrillard, Jean, (1983) Semiotext(e) and Jean Baudrillard

as Chinatown is a simulation of China, the map also is a simulation. A map sees no home and holds no personal memory. Likewise writing holds no thought for the individual when looked at in a certain way. If a world map were placed before you, would you know where China was? Would it make a difference if it were a Chinese map that was placed before you? How about a British map of the world? If we assume that there are three maps placed before you, one in English, one in Chinese and one blank one would you be able to point to China on each one? It would be easy if you know English, Chinese or have an understanding of geography.

Take for example the blank map without any written language on it. This map relies on you the reader to have knowledge of geography in order to remember where China should be in relation to other landmasses. I would argue that it would be near impossible to see all of the landmass of China from within the boundaries of China. So I would also argue that you are not using your direct knowledge of China, as an individual when looking at this blank map. You would be using another map, or imagery that has been taken from satellite images perhaps. Putting it more bluntly you are not relying on just your knowledge of China to place it on the map. You are using

other landmasses and secondary knowledge to help inform you.

How would the addition of language add or detract to the use of the map? Take a Chinese map to someone who knows no Chinese and it would be more distracting and possibly add to the imagined China. If everything looks Chinese does that mean it is? In some respects that question could be backed up. Take for example a Chinese takeaway meal ordered from a restaurant in Glasgow's Chinatown. The references to China are certainly present, as we would call it a Chinese takeaway. The food, we would hope, is not made in China; it is no doubt made in a little kitchen behind the restaurant. So why then do we not define it as Glaswegian food? One would assume it all comes down to styles of cooking. In China I am sure the same meal would not be called Chinese food but perhaps simply food. So how does this relate back to the Chinese map? The restaurant is a signifier of location. The food being a signifier of China or Chinese style. The restaurant is out with the boundaries of China yet held in a reproduced version called Chinatown. The food is Chinese like for example the Chinese map but it is not made in China. This style of food has been passed on in the form of knowledge from one to another in order for it to be made in Glasgow's Chinatown. Could it even be

argued that it has been passed on as a concept transcending language? Language serves to create a subculture within the intended audience. It assumes you can understand that language.

China For The Individual

What is China for the individual? A near impossible question to answer as it implies an individual response. For me China is a concept that references texts with its own unique texts. China is a mystified place of intrigue. If we are to look at people such as Yinan Li we see that this question is of contemporary debate within her thoughts. She states on her website,

“At present I am working on the project "Culture In Between". After the past few years of research in the Chinese culture, it is, ironically, even harder for me to talk about the "Chinese" identity. Does "China" exist for itself, or does it only exist when being "looked at" by other cultures? How do we define "culture"? Is there a so-called "culture in between" or "culture beyond the

cultures"? These are the questions, which I try to answer in my book.“¹¹

Yinan Li was born in 1972 in Beijing. She studied German Literature, Theatre Arts and Sinology in Beijing, New York and Hamburg and received her Ph.D. in 2005. In the same year she established NaBaTa Theatre Arts Studio. Now teaching at the University of Munich, Yinan Li also writes for a number of cultural journals such as ART WORLD (Shanghai), BOOK TOWN (Shanghai) and NEW DRAMA (Beijing). Her research interests include European Theatre Arts, Contemporary Art in China and Intercultural Communication. Some one well versed and respected in her field she has herself come into difficulty in understanding the existence of China. She is on the other side of the fence in comparison to me. I have the position of never having been to China and she has the Position of being born there. Two people both from different cultures analysing similar theories.

Conclusion

Barthes's essay, 'The Death of The Author', is of great importance to this debate. He gives theory and

¹¹ Yinan Li, (April 2007) [http:// www.liyinan.net](http://www.liyinan.net)

methodology to pose arguments as to the use of China as a text. The author of China is simply dead when you become the reader of China. Chinese products and Chinatown add to the demise of China as a place and create China as the other. The collective conscience understands the existence of China without doubt. Where the understanding of China's existence being to fray is in the definition of China by the individual. Is China a culture, an imagined concept, a place, a town or a section of a city in New York or Glasgow? How you answered the question of the existence of China is purely down to your belief of your own individual reality and your resident culture. We are all aware that we think and are conscious that you can not will away conscious though, yet if you were to try hard enough you could, I believe, will the existence of China away.

For the person who has not heard of China before reading this essay, China is a collection of five letters that form the word China. For the person born in China it is their birthplace, a physical location. For the onlooker into that culture it is a differing society bound by the title China. China by its nature has the potential to exist in many forms. China as the author of those forms could be argued not to exist to the reader. Could this be that it is actually not in existence?

Does China exist for me? In my opinion it is a text that references others in a tangled web of belief, knowledge and reproduction. It is existent only within the internalised space of my subconscious. I understand China as a place within which my imagined grandeur is little in comparison. So when asked the question "Does China exist?" I shall simply turn around and say, "Yes". If you were to ask me what China is and how it exists though, I think the answer would be a lot more complex than stating that it is a country. It would be a mosaic of quotes that are bound by the term China. Not a country, not a place but simply a replicable concept deciphered by the reader.

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