TRANSNATIONAL HYBRIDITY: ARGENTINE FILM REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE(NESS)

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Abstract: Argentine movie Chinese Take Out constitutes both a cultural representation and a signifying practice. As a filmic representation, it allows visual encoding of current economic and political experience. It depicts cultural stereotyping of Asian (Chinese, specifically), from a Latin American perspective. The film also exemplifies how Asian popular culture is re-interpreted and re-appropriated across national borders in Latin America. The article's main claim is that the relationship between the two main characters (an Argentine and a Chinese) is symbolic and reflective of the multifaceted character of the international relation between both countries/regions.

Keywords: China, Latin America, film studies, cultural studies, hybridity.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

Both Long (2001) and Hall (1995) argue against a homogenous or unitary concept of culture. Long explicitly advances the notion of embracing "theoretically the central issues of cultural repertoires, heterogeneity and hybridity". Hall (1995) explicitly refers to hybridity as a process of transculturation. Which "describes one of the key cultural processes which operate between hitherto sharply differentiated cultures and peoples who are forced to interact". Chinese Take Out is the first – and so far, the only – filmic attempt of cultural representation of Asia in a Latin context. And its main narrative is about the creation of a transcultural or inter-cultural space linking China and Argentina, or –

more broadly - Asia and Latin America. The film constitutes a visual encoding of current economic and political experience. It depicts cultural stereotyping of Asian (Chinese, specifically), from a Latin American perspective and the bringing down of those simplistic descriptions of cultural traits. The relation between the main characters is in itself an expression of the fluidity and flexible dynamics of hybridity. We speak of hybridity and not heterogeneity because the latter involves multiple social and cultural forms within the same context. Hybridity, on the contrary, involves mixed end products that are results of combination or "cultural cross pollination". Hybridity creates new cultural identities, which is exactly what happens to the main characters: they are both transformed during and by the interaction with each other. Indeed, this essay's main argument and contribution is that Chines Take Out's depiction of this emerging trans-cultural space between China and Latin America is expressing a new vector of globalization leading to a re-conceptualization of culture in the line of what Hall has proposed: an unsettled, open, internally incoherent space "formed through the juxtaposition and copresence of different cultural forces and discourses, and their effects" (Hall 1995: 187-188).

THE PLOT

Chinese Take-Out (original title in Spanish Un cuento chino, literal English translation "A Chinese tale") is a 2011 film that narrates the encounter between a stereotypical middle-class argentine – Roberto – and a Chinese national – Jun. Roberto is a bitter, lonely man. He feels the world around him has gone mad. In order to prove his point, he collects newspaper articles about bizarre news and grotesque mishaps originally prompted by a lack of meticulousness. An owner of a hardware store, he believes he has his life under control and is safe from surprises. This certainty is shattered when he sees Jun being thrown out of a moving taxi after

being mugged. Roberto helps him and tries to put things right. Taking Jun in proves especially challenging because neither one speaks the other one's language. Roberto has a truncated romantic relation with Mari, a friend's sister in law. Jun's appearance makes them come together again. When, after ordering Chinese take-out, Roberto, Mari and Jun communicate through the Chinese delivery boy, Jun discloses to Roberto he came to Argentina to find his uncle. Roberto explains to Jun that he has become such a grumpy man because his worldview has been shattered by the Falklands war. Finally, Roberto opens up and shows Jun his collection to prove his point of the senselessness of the world around him. He points out the article about a Chinese girl who was killed by a cow that fell out of a moving aircraft. Jun breaks down and explains in tears the woman was his fiancée. The reason he had come to Argentina in the first place was to escape the tragedy that surrounded him in China. In the end, Jun finds his uncle and Roberto finds love with Mari.

COINCIDENTIA OPPOSITORUM

The main theme and symbolic meaning of *Chinese Take-Out* is complementary opposites. Both characters embody the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Right from the start the movie shows Jun's fiancée death scene in China and the camera takes a 180° rotation to show Roberto's hardware store in Argentina. This antipodal geographical nature of China and Argentina, Fucheng and Buenos Aires is a prelude to the Jun and Roberto personality opposition. This is what Mircea Eliade (1976) termed "the mythical pattern", also used by psychiatrist Carl Jung to express on the one hand a diametrical opposition of two figures and on the other the inescapable destiny to be reconciled at some time of reconciliation of opposites and unification of diversity. Interestingly, both Eliade and Jung use this principle to analyze man's deep dissatisfaction with his actual situation or what Malraux has termed "the human

condition". The mythical "fall" from Paradise creates a deep dissatisfaction in man, a feeling of being "torn and separate". Zygmunt Bauman argues that identities are set up as dichotomies: woman is the other of man, animal is the other of human, stranger is the other of native, abnormality the other of norm, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, insanity the other of reason, lay public the other of the expert, foreigner the other of state subject, enemy the other of friend (Bauman 1991). Chinese Take-Out expresses this narrative and dynamic through Jun and Roberto.

The *oppositorum* part is clear in the characters' personality: Jun is young, open, naïve and energetic; whereas Roberto is a lonely, surly and much of a control freak. This is well stated from the beginning: Jun has his life centered on a love that ends tragically while Roberto has deliberately walled his feelings for Mari. But this apparent opposition is not limited to places and people. Food is also portrayed as an example of the antithetical nature of both characters. There are two scenes in which Roberto presents Jun with two quintessentially argentine dinners. The first one is when he serves his Chinese guest beef, blood sausage, bull testicles, liver, kidney and chitterlings. All traditional components of the argentine barbecue or asado, seem disgusting to Jun. Later on, Jun and Roberto are invited by Mari to dine on puchero or beef stew. Here, Jun is instructed to suck on the cow's bone marrow, as an argentine delicacy. This is all lost to the Chinese guest. The following day, Roberto Mari and Jun order Chinese take-out at Roberto's house. This is very symbolic, for it is the moment in which communication begins. Having Chinese take-out at an argentine house is an apt metaphor for bridging the divide, bringing down the otherness between Roberto and Jun. The film reconstructs thus the process of stereotyping. They both begin with their exaggerated and over-generalized beliefs over the other. And the stark contrast between the argentine and the Chinese meals and culinary habits is the best and more dramatic example. However, it is at this high point of coincidentia oppositorum that stereo-



typing ends and trans-cultural hybridity begins. Despite being a lighthearted dramedy, *Chinese Take-Out* carries a very potent criticism of the notion of identity. Roberto and Jun do not share rituals, language, gastronomic habits or patterns of behavior. All of these supposedly embody the contents that define the belonging to a certain cultural tradition, the contents that can rightfully claim to be representative of a given "cultural identity". The film constantly challenges this essentialist definition of identity.

Indeed, there is a common thread running through all the differences and similarities between the characters, their countries of origins, their customs and cultures: the cow. Following Saussure, the animal becomes throughout the entire movie a signifier with a different signified for Roberto and for Jun. For the latter it is a reminder of tragedy, whilst for the former comes in the way of opportunity, his way to Mari, to love. Jun notices this, and paints Mari's cow in Roberto's backyard wall as an invitation to conjure up his (Roberto and his own) fear. The movie opening and closing scene feature the cow. In the beginning, it is the animal that falls from the sky and kills Jun's bride, setting events in motion in China. In the end, Roberto is walking towards the Mari, who is milking her cow. The allegory to the expression "sacred cow" may seem too cliché or too obvious. It is, however, nevertheless very apt to convey meaning: both Jun and Roberto have structured their life in response to the sacred cow of love. Although their responses are diametrically opposed, they are nonetheless responses to deep personal psychological traumas. At a social level, the notions of similarity and difference are central to building national identity and achieving sense of social belonging. Identities have some element of exclusivity. Since it is a social operation (socially constructed, created by societies and elites or social groups), belonging is conditional upon the acceptance of some defined - individual or collective - other. Chinese Take-Out is an example of how Latin America is managing collective ideas about Chinese popular culture, about what is China – and Chinese people – like.

The oppositorum component is very strong, for Chinese are perceived as different, outsiders. This is not to argue that they are perceived as an enemy or a threat. According to the Spring 2015 Global Attitudes Survey of the Pew Research Center, Latin America has a higher median favorable opinion of China than the global average (55 per cent over 53 per cent). The country with the least favorable perception of China is Mexico, with 43 per cent. Countries surveyed in the region all showed majoritarian rates of positive views: Argentina (53 per cent), Brazil (55 per cent), Venezuela (58 per cent), Peru (60 per cent) and Chile (66 per cent). Moreover, negative views on the Asian giant lower: Argentina (26 per cent), Brazil (36 per cent), Venezuela (33 per cent), Peru (22 per cent) and Chile (25 per cent). Latin America's perceptions of China are largely driven by economics, and the China-Latin America relationship has undergone dramatic changes recently. From 2000 to 2018, merchandise trade increased 18-fold, from \$12 billion to over \$270 billion. Between 1990 and 2009, China invested only \$7 billion total in Latin America. After 2010, China has invested between \$10 and \$14 billion per year in the region, with Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela as the largest recipients. Chinese trade and investment with Latin America are expected to grow even further into the future. At the first meeting of the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (China-CELAC) forum in January 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a goal of \$500 billion in trade by 2019. China needs Latin American products, and Latin America needs Chinese capital and investment, particularly in infrastructure. In 2018, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, and Venezuela joined the Belt and Road U\$1 trillion Chinese infrastructure global investment initiative. China has replaced the United States as the top trade partner for Brazil, Chile, and Peru and surpassed Brazil as Uruguay's top trading partner.

At the societal level, Chinese immigration has increased with the general immigration trend. In Argentina there are almost 2,200,000 foreigners that represent 4.9 per cent of the national

population, according to the estimates of the United Nations (UN) for the year 2017. Registrations in 2017 by the Argentine National Migration Bureau (DNM) were mostly Paraguayans (60 thousand), Bolivians (40 thousand), Venezuelans (30 thousand), Peruvians (20 thousand), Colombians (16 thousand), Brazilians (8 thousand), Chileans (four thousand), Ecuadorians (3 thousand) and Uruguavan (3 thousand). The Chinese immigrant population comes in ninth place (2700), although it is the first country of origin for non-Latin American migrants. The great wave of Chinese immigration began in the 1990s and more than 80 per cent of migrants came from Fujian province. In the movie, Jun is from Fujian. In reality, the actor playing Jun was born in Taipei. The population of Fujian province is characterized by being an area of merchants specialized in merchandise trade activities. Although there are no updated and accurate official calculations, the combination of DNM and Chinese Embassy figures shows around 200,000 people of Chinese origin live in the country, including the young, second-generation born in Argentina from Chinese descent. With regards to their economic role, it is mainly in the supermarket business. The Argentine-Chinese Chamber of commerce estimates that there are around 12,000 Chinese supermarkets in Argentina, 92 per cent in Buenos Aires. The success of the business model rests on two advantages specific to Chinese migrants: owners of supermarkets have created collaborative networks that allow them to negotiate better prices with suppliers and - due to their culture - do not demand financing and pay cash at the time of delivery of the merchandise. This has allowed them to expand and consolidate a reputation for immediate payments and steady, bulk demand. The nexus between business and migration is clear: heads of families arrive little by little and spread the word to relatives, bringing their consanguineous people protected by the law. The family lives and works in the commerce, which are usually open holidays and non-working Sundays. The Chinese community is close knit and very supportive among its

members, very modest in their habits and very austere in their spending.

Coincidentia oppositorum is not just a category from psychology or anthropology, but it can be applied also to international politics. From the point of view of international relations, the ontological change in the structure of the world that the ascent of China represented since the beginning of the 2000's can be inscribed in this same narrative, in the past been buried under the irreconcilable oppositions of the Cold War. Chinese foreign policy, explicitly terms its engagement with the Latin American region in such terms as "mutual complementarity", "mutual benefit" and "win-win". In the process mutual of (re)discovery characters (Roberto and Jun), actors (China and Latin America) and structures (world order) are all transformed.

The coincidentia inherent to the oppositorum is the theme running throughout the entire movie. Just as Roberto and Jun will go through the journey from opposition to complementation, so has China and Latin America been increasingly engaged economically, politically and – more importantly – culturally. Paradoxically, it is only in the juxtaposition of these two characters from antipodal geographies and apparently antithetical temperaments that the true essence of each other comes to full realization. We can only fully discover Jun through his opposition with Roberto. We can only truly understand Roberto when he opens up with Jun. It is only at that critical encounter of both characters that seem so opposite that we come to have a full picture of each other. Roberto's obsession with turning off the lights exactly at 11:00 PM is because that is the time when he went to bed when he came home from the Falklands/Malvinas war only to find his father dead. Indeed, Roberto collects uncanny stories from around the world, and watches planes take off and land as a recreational activity. One of this news is precisely Jun's story. Jun's desperate quest to find his uncle was the result of the traumatic experience of having his fiancée killed and the unbearable constant reminder China became for him. They not just complement each other but com-

plete each other life stories/journeys. Jun gets closure on his tragically curtailed marriage attempt and Roberto gets openness to love. Jun leaves behind his death-marked life, while Roberto advances – literally, in the final scene – to a new life next to Mari. None of this would have been possible without the intervention of the other. Again, viewed from the lens of global economics and international politics, Chinese Take-Out can be read as metaphorical of the deeper dynamics taking place at the international-level between China and Latin America. In the last decade and a half, the region has experienced with new possibilities in governance and development thanks to the buoying demand for primary products coming from China. This allowed a series of progressive governments to expand social and political rights to include a dearth of socioeconomic and sexual minorities. This expanded not only material coverage (who gets protected) and benefits (how much do they get), but it also redefined the justification for this expansion (who is worthy and why). It is this transformation that led each country in the region to recreate its own identity as a collective. China is also helping Latin American countries to exorcise its own (social) fears: poverty and underdevelopment.

IDENTITY

There are many explanations for the construction of identity. Althusser (1971) posits the notion that subjects are "culturally interpellated", hailed as subjects by being addressed as the occupants of certain positions or roles. Hall (1995) also defines identities as "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives off the past". *Chinese Take-Out* could also be analyzed through the psychological perspectives on the building of identity. In a very Freudian sense, both characters go through a mutually reinforcing psychological process in which they both assimilate aspects of each other and are thus transformed. Chinese Take-Out resembles Mexican writ-

er Carlos Fuentes' novel *Change of Skin*, in which the theme explored is the mixed composition and fluidity of the identities of four individuals and two couples against the background of a modern Mexico unable to "define" its identity. The film becomes in this way a popular cultural reflection political and economic dynamics at play in the Sino-Latin American relation. In the decade and a half since the new millennium, Chinese international demand and Latin American supply have mutually transformed each other's economies and politics.

Thus, social identities are created through ongoing social interaction with other people and subsequent self-reflection about who we think we are according to these social exchanges. International social identity would hence be produced through agreement, disagreement, and negotiation with other (foreign) people. We adjust our own behavior and self-image based upon these interactions and (self)reflection about these interactions. Since the 1980s a growing corpus of literature has debated questions about the relation between the hegemony of Western discourses and the formation of colonial and postcolonial subjects and identities. In Chinese Take-Out, the basic insight is analogous: the construction of hybrid intersubjectivity, traversed by the superimposition of conflicting languages and cultures. Chinese Take-Out goes beyond stereotypical self-perception and other-perception. It attempts to build identity - personal and collective - forward, conceiving not in terms of a few shared defining traits. This allows for both Roberto and Jun to be perceived as legitimately choosing and constructing a personal identity, reflective of the broader metaphorical theme of the collective identity of the China-Latin America relation. This is why – despite the existing political and economic asymmetries – it is not easily reducible to the "identities" that can be picked up from the existing conceptual international relations arsenal. These identities are labels such as "neocolonialism", "neo-extractivism" or "soft imperialism". Jun and Roberto's story is a popular culture symbolization of the possibility of viewing things "from the place of the other", on the basis of an acknowl-



edgement both of the uniqueness of that place and of its similarity to one's own.

So, if we have already established the validity of the main premise of this essay (which is that Chinese Take-Out is symbolic and metaphorical of broader international dynamics) then the question becomes: who is interpellating whom? What is the nature of the interpellation that is taking place between China (as an example of Asian popular culture) and Argentina (an example of Latin American perception and adoption)? Cinematic representation models cultural identity, reflecting and defining otherness. Despite taking the Latin American point of view, Chinese Take-Out avoids portraying positively or negatively, or judging Chinese culture against the European, white heritage that is so predominant in in the argentine cultural matrix. The film boldly questions the natural assumption to present plurality as a problem. This is a subtle but clear critique of the presumption that the "normal" state of affairs is a homogeneous and unitary identity, individual or collective, conceptualized in essentialist terms. This is a novelty in film studies in Latin America, and to a lesser extent an interesting research agenda for cultural studies more broadly. There is a very illustrative early scene in *Chinese Take-Out* in which Roberto takes Jun to the police station in order to seek some public authority to take care of him. The officer in charge takes notes and describes Jun as "an oriental". This contrasts wildly with the scene at the Buenos Aires Chinatown, in which Roberto asks ethnic Chinese to translate for him in order to communicate with Jun and the man that he picks speaks Cantonese while Jun only Mandarin, before insulting Roberto in perfect Spanish.

As in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the movie reflects the construction of the "other". However, the explanatory variable is not colonial or imperial imposition. This would imply a divided subject, caught up in a clash of contradictory discourses, one "native" and one imperial or colonial. The conflicting component is not the result of a power operation – a vertical political North-South divide – but rather a horizontal East-West division.



The intersubjectivity, is created not by top-down imposition but rather by a peer-to-peer impossibility. The familiar take on the mystical, mysterious East as the locus of rejuvenation for the jaded West exists, but transformation now works both ways. There is an essential difficulty to connect – due to the lack of a common language – and to understand each other – for lack of agreement on the most basic daily customs, from toilet use to food tastes. And yet, they find themselves tangled together, unavoidably tied to each other and affecting each other's destiny deeply. What *Chinese Take-Out* symbolizes is a rather more fluid construction, through the transnational interaction between Asian and Latin American popular cultures, symbolized in the figures of Roberto and Jun.

It is not only hybridity, but also horizontal hybridity. The formation of this cross-border identity follows - in the cultural realm – the same pattern trade and investment are following in the economic dimension: a move away from a model of unidirectional international relations linking advanced countries to developing countries and into emerging-emerging linkages. The latter produce innovative hybrid policies that depart from the rigidly hierarchical consensus of the neoliberal values of finance capitalism that inform the current structure and content of the dominant narrative on globalization. The relation between China and Latin America opens a horizontal "third space" (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Tejeda 1999) of cultural hybridity made possible by the increasing importance of horizontal, "Third World" international relations. South-South trade has outperformed both world trade and South-North trade. South-South trade in goods had a 25 per cent share of global trade in 2015, up from 10 per cent in 1990. Developing economies accounted for almost half of the world's merchandise exports in 2014 compared to less than a third in 2000. China alone accounted for 21 per cent of exports and 27 per cent of imports of all South-South trade. Foreign direct investment flows to developing economies reached a record high of US\$681 billion in 2014, constituting 55 per cent of world financial

flows, climbing from less than 20 percent in 2000. International Monetary Fund data show that the total GDP of emerging or middle-income countries was around US\$24.7 trillion, while that of advanced or high-income countries was around \$52.8 trillion in 2014. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) figures show that the economic growth rate of the advanced countries between 2008-2014 was 0.6 per cent, while for the middle-income economies was 5.0 per cent. This "rise of the rest" is the material underpinning of the combination of different cultural ingredients and repertoires, social forms

There are two very important scenes in which the Chinese Embassy appears. This is important because it introduces a clear difference between Jun as a Chinese person and the diplomatic see as the Chinese state. Although for Fenton (2003) the concept of nation refers to descent and culture to communities with a state or state-like political form. There is a clear separation or difference between China as a polity and the Chinese as a community. This is a critical difference when constructing otherness, especially with regards to a (foreign) national identity or collective. In the first one, the officers are very kind, receive Roberto, listen to Jun's tribulations and promise to take care of it. They even hand Roberto their personal card and guarantee they are at his entire disposal. In the second Embassy scene, however, a much more flustered Roberto - this time without Jun - is kept waiting until finally he interrupts the consular officers. After a heated argument, an unfriendly, towering Chinese security officer evicts him. Both scenes are reflective of two very different stages in the China-Latin America relations. The first one is the decade 2000-2010, in which an outward-oriented foreign policy meant China was an unconditional, open-checkbook friend, which came to the region with trade and investment opportunities. After the 2009 financial crisis, China concentrated more on the domestic market, and after 2014 became more assertive in its foreign policy goals and strategies. The second Embassy scene shows another vector in the construction of identity: the political one. Chinese Take-Out creates the



cultural interpellation under an inter-subject matrix, with two members of two different societies; it deliberately leaves out the power component. This only appears when Nation-States come into the picture. With states, power becomes the dominant organizing factor in the construction of identity. This is the reason why the Argentine police officer dismissively refers to Jun as "an oriental" or why the Chinese Embassy's bouncer kicks out Roberto. The two characters are exactly the same: security officers that enforce the previously defined (created) categories of insiders and outsiders. At the Embassy, Roberto is as much an outsider as Jun is at the police station. This is why we have left out Chinese governmental initiatives to shape perception, the deliberate attempts to leverage political, media, and educational people-to-people exchanges to create a narrative about China. In Latin America, this has come mainly by the support of China-friendly media outlets that can portray China as a reliable partner and support China's foreign policy positions and objectives in the region. Another way is the 39 Confucius Institutes currently operating in the region, coupled with the 11 Confucius Classrooms serving over 50,000 students and involving more than 8 million people in cultural activities as of late 2018. Since 2015, the Chinese government has provided training to over 90 regional teachers, 80 Latin American journalists, and 300 young Latin American political leaders. By 2017, approximately 2,200 Latin Americans studied at Chinese universities, although it is hard to quantify the exact total supported by the Chinese government for absence of data reliable compilation.

The powerful message behind *Chinese Take-Out* is that horizontal relations – as opposed to relations between states or between state and society – can reify the bonds of solidarity and redefine the boundaries of identity beyond (and better) than the narrow reach and interests of nation states. Both the Argentine state – in the figure of the police officer – and the Chinese State – inasmuch as exemplified by the Embassy's personnel – have much more limited notions of identity. The vertical cannot capture the



horizontal; organized hierarchical power cannot perceive what happens at the communal – with its double meaning of commoners and community; hegemony versus hybridity. Political Identity demands a rigid conceptualization, which can capture what grants unity and uniqueness to an entity (the State), for it functions as the cultural substrate that justifies the uses and abuses of state power. Indeed, a condition for the very existence of the Nation-State is the exclusive definitional monopoly of an absolute, "coherent", "pure" and "homogeneous" sense of identity; in which diversity or plurality are not easily – or at all – tolerated. The Argentine State has historically bore this genocidal mark from its origins, becoming manifest in the nineteenth century with the massacre of the indigenous peoples and afro-descendants, all the way into the 1970's and the leftist guerrilla youth. Territorially reductive polarizations have usually bred intolerance and violence

CONCLUSION

There are very few trans-national exercises on cultural representation between Asia and Latin America. *Chinese Take-Out* exemplifies this by using China and Argentina. Even more, in the process of portraying a *coincidentia oppositorum* in the main characters, it successfully dilutes and crosses all kinds of conceptual, cultural and other(ness) border lines. Such forms of horizontal hybridization have not yet, perhaps, become the rule, but they are far from being the exception either. The metaphorical representation of a new vector in international relations is also a novelty that has not been seen before in Latin American or Asian cinematic production.

The *coincidentia oppositorum* dynamic which structures the narrative of the film is symbolic of the China-Argentina relation; itself a specific case study that must be expanded to the Latin American region and to other cases of China's contemporary global reach. The cultural politics of local representation and op-

positional discourse in the film opens up a fruitful, novel avenue for future research through the hybridization of societies in the context of XXI-century globalization.

NOTES

¹ For Hall, the culture that evolves in the context of a transculturation processes is "the result of some never-completed, complex process of combining elements from different cultural repertoires to form 'new' cultures which are related to but which are not exactly like any of the originals" (Hall 1995: 193).

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