

## Book Review: Roland Barthes's *Travels in China*

Barthes, Roland, *Travels in China*, Polity Press. 2012, 226 pp, \$14.95, (pbk), ISBN 978-0-7456-5081-4. Edited by Anne Herschberg Pierrot. Translated by Andrew Brown.

Late in his tour of China, Roland Barthes, the famous French literary critic and semiotician, recounts a girls' volleyball match between teams from China and Iran. He notes the "asexual" and "poised" Chinese team and its "mathematical" approach. The "opulent, broad-hipped" Iranians, by contrast, are destined to lose. Barthes similarly describes the "matriarchy" of the Chinese boys' team as they fall, then rise, and fall again, to their Iranian opponents. Through this description, Barthes attempts to capture a tension between eroticism and uniformity in the scene before him.

Such is the subtext that builds over the course of *Travels in China*, an English translation of the journal Barthes kept during his three-week tour of Mainland China in 1974. Barthes had been invited, along with the editors of the French literary magazine *Tel Quel*, to tour China and observe the daily lives of Chinese citizens living under a Communist regime. He begins his journal with the mundane details of his departure from Paris but ends with a series of sprawling notes about the nature of Chinese society and the limits on personal expression—notes he sought to compile for a future book project that never materialized.

Barthes's visit occurred during the last few years of the Cultural Revolution, a period of tremendous societal upheaval that ultimately concluded with the death of Mao Zedong, the fall of the Gang of Four, and the rise of Deng Xiaoping by the end of the 1970s. In his accounts, Barthes observes a consistent barrage of propaganda designed to discredit Lin Biao, a former military leader who died in a plane crash in Mongolia after a failed attempt to wrest power from Mao in 1971. According to Barthes, the Communist Party's attempt to tie Lin and his traitorous actions to the bourgeoisie impulses of Liu Shaoqi and other moderates, as well as to the hierarchical doctrine of Confucius, was known as the "*pi Lin pi Kong*" campaign.

It is this reliance on prepared party statements, or "bricks," as he calls them, that causes Barthes his greatest consternation. As his group is led from city to city, Barthes seeks insights into the nature of the Chinese people and their relationships to one another, but finds much of the underlying thoughts and opinions of his guides and acquaintances impenetrable. For example, Barthes is brought to a series of People's Communes, where VIPs and foreign guests were taken to observe the policies of the Communist regime in practice. These scenes of development were typically used by cadres during the Cultural Revolution as propaganda in action, with prepared examples of modernity and productivity not typical of most communes.<sup>1</sup> Barthes is keenly aware of the staged quality of these presentations, and he laments the lack of examples and use of generalities, a source of frustration for a noted deconstructionist scholar.

Given the carefully scripted tours and consistent party line voiced by his guides, it is no surprise that Barthes peppers his journal with references to sexuality and the smiles of passersby—a means to inject spontaneity into a repetitive routine of travel, doctrine, and

sightseeing. His frustration is palpable, and often culminates in exasperated longing with few moments of true release (the volleyball match described above is one such example).

In following Barthes's daily entries, the reader shares in his frustrations, be they personal or academic. He is continually striving to understand the scenes before him, at times empathetically viewing these "bricks" as a means to make sense of a fallen order. Yet, more often, he throws his rhetorical hands up, lamenting the banal discussions and impediments to a breakthrough of insight about Maoist China.

Barthes is truly keeping a journal, one that is part diary, part work space. He does not spend time discussing cultural or political context, as that is not his goal. However, the present-day reader unfamiliar with People's Communes and the goals of propaganda campaigns during the Cultural Revolution may find the lack of information about this period limiting. Those readers seeking a more analytical take on this period would do well to read Jeremy Brown's recent work on communes and propaganda as a reflection of the Communist Party.

By contrast, those professors who are comfortable in their knowledge of this tumultuous period in Chinese history will find Barthes's journal an interesting, if disjointed, illustration of the actions of the Communist Party during the last few years of the Cultural Revolution. These readers will surely take interest in the degree to which these tours were carefully scripted, and how the thrust of propaganda during Barthes's trip reflected the beginning of the end for the Mao-led regime; many of the advocates for the *pi Lin pi Kong* campaign were undone by the extension of their efforts to discredit influential figures, such as Zhou Enlai, Hua Guofeng, and, especially, Deng Xiaoping. Unfortunately for all readers, novice and expert, Barthes is unable to provide as unique a commentary on this propaganda as one might hope, and he often leaves the reader frustrated with the unfulfilled promise of a brilliant mind giving up too soon.

Perhaps this limitation is the greatest strength of *Travels in China*. Barthes continually seeks deeper insights into the lives of ordinary Chinese but departs from the Mainland more perplexed than he could have imagined at the start of his journey. Though his curiosity grows as he battles sleep deprivation and adapts to his surroundings, his clarity of understanding does not. Readers of Barthes's journal will share in this tension and come away from the experience much as he did: seeking a moment of connection with a people shielded by a totalitarian government—one threatened by personal expression and individual fulfillment.

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#### REFERENCES

Brown, Jeremy. 2012. *City Versus Countryside in Mao's China: Negotiating the Divide*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

#### NOTES

1. This is a tactic still used today by the North Korean government, captured in a number of documentaries, such as *Welcome to North Korea*, *The Vice Guide to North Korea*, and the BBC newsmagazine *Panorama's North Korea Undercover*.