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From Miracle to Montage: The Interpreter Figure in the Narratives of Latin American Travelers to the New China

De milagro a montaje: la figura del intérprete en las narrativas de viajeros latinoamericanos a la Nueva China

Abstract

This article analyses the role of the figure of the language interpreter in Latin American travel writing on the People's Republic of China during the 1950s and 1960s, early decades of cultural diplomacy efforts between these regions. Through an examination of the crónica *China 6 a.m.* (1954), by Colombian anthropologist and writer Manuel Zapata Olivella, and the novel *Los ojos de bambú* (1964), by Chilean novelist Mercedes Valdivieso, this article argues that the interpreter figure, far from an invisible conduit of information, played a significant role in how Latin American travelers experienced the Chinese Revolution and negotiated their ideals of individual and collective transformation. Through the analysis of the interpretation act as an embodied, affective experience, beyond a sole cognitive transfer of meaning, Zapata and Valdivieso's texts shed light both on the PRC's mechanisms of soft power in Cold War geopolitical struggles, as well as the travelers' aesthetic and political pursuits in a global context of revolution.

Palabras claves

Cultural diplomacy, language interpreters, translation, People's Republic of China, travel writing.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el rol de la figura del intérprete en la literatura latinoamericana de viajes a la República Popular China en las décadas de los 50 y 60, al inicio de las relaciones de diplomacia cultural entre estas regiones. A través del estudio de la crónica *China 6 a.m.* (1954), por el antropólogo y escritor colombiano Manuel Zapata Olivella y la novela *Los ojos de bambú* (1964), de la escritora chilena Mercedes Valdivieso, este artículo propone que el intérprete, lejos de ser un conducto invisible de información, cumplió un papel central en cómo viajeros latinoamericanos experimentaron la revolución china y la forma en que negociaron sus ideales de transformación personal y colectiva. A través del análisis del acto interpretativo como una experiencia física y afectiva más que como solamente el traslado cognitivo del significado, los textos de Zapata y Valdivieso revelan tanto los mecanismos de poder blando que la RPC busco blandir en el contexto de la Guerra Fría, así como las búsquedas políticas y estéticas de estos intelectuales viajeros en un ambiente marcado por la revolución global.

Keywords

Diplomacia cultural, intérpretes, traducción, República Popular China, escritura de viajes.

In an attempt to mobilize global support for its newly attained triumph, the People's Republic of China (PRC) starting in the 1950s deployed a broad strategy of cultural diplomacy towards Latin America, building on discourses of Third Worldism and international solidarity. For the PRC, this was a form of exerting soft power, that is, expanding its sphere of geopolitical influence through the circulation of its culture and ideological values. For many Latin American leftists, the success of the Chinese Communist Revolution put forward an emancipatory model that aligned with the region's own material conditions, namely regarding its predominantly rural, peasant populations, at the same time as it envisioned a new society that would reconcile an ancient, millenarian tradition with revolutionary socialist ideals. At the center of this new relationship between Latin America and the New China was the role of *travel*, fomented at the state level by the PRC to bring intellectuals, artists, politicians and other important figures of diverse ideological backgrounds as foreign guests to learn about, and especially report back, the successes and transformative changes of the Chinese Revolution. The Latin American travelers who arrived in the PRC in the role of cultural, peace or friendship delegates during the fifties and sixties often, on their return, published



accounts of what they had witnessed, often in positive – even ecstatic – tones. In doing so, they functioned as non-state actors for cultural diplomacy, who mediated the political relationship of soft power between these regions years before formal diplomatic relations were established (Ahumada 7).

In this article I delve into the notion of linguistic-cultural mediation in these spaces of cultural diplomacy, especially given that, as Jorge Locane argues, the entire relationship between Latin America and the PRC during these decades was “un fenómeno de intercambio cultural sin precedentes que implicó una compleja empresa de *traducción cultural* a escala Sur-Sur” (Locane 57, my emphasis). While the circulation in the Americas of the print culture that resulted from this exchange has begun to receive increased attention, the act of translation itself, specifically the role of the language interpreter, is somewhat overlooked. In part this may be because many of these travelers, when writing their accounts, tended to partially silence or gloss over the role of their language interpreters to strengthen their own authorial voice and personal testimony about what they were observing in the PRC (Montt Strabucchi “Writing about China”, 112). However, as I argue here, given both a lack of knowledge of the local languages and the state’s attempt to control the travelers’ experiences, translation was a crucial element in the construction of the image that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wanted to give of the new China, as well as in how the Latin American visitors understood and processed their time in the PRC. By translation, however, I am referring not only to the transfer of information but rather the complex negotiations of power and authority between the traveler, the interpreters and the state, between socialist ideals, gender dynamics, and orientalist imaginaries that took place in their encounter. In order to analyze the role and significance of this form of mediation in the experience of Latin American travelers to the PRC, this article examines two autobiographical or semi-autobiographical texts that center the figure of the interpreter and the interpretation scene: *China, 6 a.m.* (1954) by Colombian doctor and writer Manuel

Zapata Olivella, and *Los ojos de bambú* (1964) by Chilean novelist Mercedes Valdivieso.¹

The specific contexts in which these works were written mark the difference in tone and, particularly, the place the interpreter occupies in each narrative. The former is the account of Zapata's visit to China in 1952 as a delegate in the Asia and Pacific Rim Peace Conference, the first major international event organized by the PRC and framed as a response to US imperialism in the context of the Korean War, and which brought delegates from all over the world to the new nation. Valdivieso's is a novel based to a great degree on her own ten-month stay in China in 1960, invited by the Association of Chinese Journalists to work and write about the revolution. Both center the interpreter figure, a young man or woman appointed by the government to serve as mediator and guide between the traveler and the local languages, geographies and, most significantly, the experience of the Chinese Revolution. As I will explore, the difference in how the interpreter is represented points to the most crucial divergence between these texts: for Zapata, the interpretation scene is a nearly miraculous encounter, where the successful relay of meaning captures the revolutionary joy of the PRC victory and, by extension, of the global liberation movement; in Valdivieso's novel, on the other hand, the failure of the act of translation parallels the narrative voice's refusal to accept the CCP's official revolutionary discourse, resulting in the break of the relationship between the two sides – though, importantly, not the narrator's friendship with China. While the circumstances of Zapata and Valdivieso's travels (the reasons for their visits, their time spent there, the PRC's geopolitical position) might account for their differences, in my reading what is significant in *China, 6 a.m.* and *Los ojos de bambú* is that, in making the translation scene a crucial element of their narrative, the act of communication emerges as a site of political struggle and negotiation within the context of the early cultural diplomacy between Latin America and the PRC.

¹ *China 6 a.m.* and *Los ojos de bambú* have received their only reedition decades after their original publications, in 2020 and 2021 respectively. This article cites from these new editions.

In considering the political nature of the interpreter at an ideological and affective level, certain concepts from the field of translation studies might be pertinent. First, it is important to recognize the act of interpretation as linguistic-cultural mediation, that is, as beyond solely information transfer and, instead, within its social and cultural contexts, responsive to the power dynamics in which both sides of the relationship are inscribed in (Payàs and Zavala 12). Doing so would challenge the supposed invisibility of the interpreter, seen traditionally as an automatic conduit of information and not as an agent who is affectively and physically invested in the mediation (Cronin and Delgado Luchner 93). Current arguments in the field have sought to change this understanding: as Gertrudis Payàs points out in her study of interpreters of Mapudungun in colonial Chile, for instance, interpretation is not an autonomous activity but a “service” or “contractual relationship” that is requested or mandated and agreed upon by all parties, and which, given its employment by necessity, is also built upon dynamics of trust – and by extension, mistrust (Payàs 19-20). Because of the contractual nature of the interpreter’s role, this figure is not “between” two parties but “for” one or another; in other words, interpretation is ideological and not impartial or neutral as its origins in diplomacy might frame it (Pöchhaker 205). Another key aspect is what Michael Cronin calls the “embodied agency” of the interpreter, that is challenging the notion of interpretation as a purely rational, intellectual endeavor and rather recognizing the physical presence of this figure and its corporeal involvement in the act of mediation (Cronin 78). These three ideas –trust, ideological commitment, embodiment– will be key in reading the scenes of linguistic-cultural mediation in *China 6 a.m.* and *Los ojos de bambú*, where the interpreters actively construct an image of the new nation by inscribing their own lives within its revolutionary process. At the same time, as both texts evidence, mediation is never a one-way street, and the travelers measure the interpreters’ accounts against their own sets of values and experiences in China. In doing so, they negotiate their authority, reaffirming or questioning the contractual relationship, and responding physically and emotionally to the interpretation act. In this way, the practice of interpretation

emerges here beyond a cognitive transfer of information and, instead, can be read as socially and affectively grounded process, a relational experience that affects all parties involved.

China, 6 a.m. and *Los ojos de bambú* offer valuable insight into the early moments of PRC cultural diplomacy towards the outside world. Translation of written documents formed an important part of this process, as the CCP sought to export Chinese culture and Maoist thought across the world, particularly to those areas beyond the socialist bloc, namely countries undergoing decolonization struggles (Xu 77).² Oral interpretation and the identity of the interpreter, however, are harder to document given the ephemeral nature of this form of mediation as well as her general invisibility, as outlined above. Yet some groundwork can be laid before an analysis of the two texts. Some of Zapata's interpreters, as I will explore in detail later, explain that they had fought during the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949) or the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), and that this influenced them to join the CCP's diplomatic efforts by learning Spanish. In fact, as Ting Guo has documented, during the aforementioned military conflicts the CCP hired young members of the Party as interpreters of Russian and English, putting them through language schools in order to serve in military and diplomatic roles. Going back to the point regarding the ideological nature of their work, these interpreters were not independent professionals but rather, Guo explains, understood their function as part of their political affiliation and status. In doing so, Party cadres relied on the interpreters as a resource in negotiating international support, while for these the role of mediation was a way of proving their loyalty and thus vying for better positions within the government (Guo 100-101). This also helps explain how Zapata and Valdivieso's interpreters were trained, with the important difference that there was even less infrastructure for the preparation of

² Of central importance here was the Foreign Language Press, dedicated to the translation of PRC policy documents, scientific material and state propaganda, as well as literature, into western languages (English, French, German and Russian) as well as other Asian languages (Vietnamese, Korean). See Xu 2014. Starting in 1963, in Latin America one of the most salient examples was the magazine *Pekin Informa*, which also offered radio programming in an effort to relay Chinese communism to a Spanish-speaking audience. See Rojas 2020.

Spanish-language mediators than for English or Russian. This became an issue especially with the arrival of the 1952 Peace Conference delegates, Zapata among them. Macarena Vidal recounts how a team of interpreters made up of a dozen young students was quickly put together under retired diplomat Meng Fu in order to fulfil this role. Not until after the visit did formal training in Spanish begin at the School of Foreign Languages in Peking University, and even then, this was precarious given the limited amount of pedagogic materials available (Vidal). This is likely where the Wang Te-en, the interpreter in Valdivieso's novel, would have completed his education.

There was, to be sure, a highly performative nature to these diplomatic manifestations and PRC hospitality more generally. As Julia Lovell has argued, Mao-era hospitality towards foreign guests was an enterprise in itself, meant to showcase a society leaving behind feudalism and successfully embarking in a radical transition to socialism. This “hospitality machine” encompassed the planning of visitors' arrival well in advance by carefully selecting the places they would see, choosing the people they would interview, and making sure they would not come into contact with the tragedies taking place because of failed economic policies (such as the famines caused by the Great Leap Forward in the late fifties) (Lovell 144). The goal was, writes Lovell, that these visitors become “international friends” who would report back their experiences in the best light possible; in treating them as honored guests, the CCP hoped to create a feeling of indebtedness that could pay off in the geopolitical power struggle of these decades (Lovell 146). This was of particular importance given the role the PRC sought to play as the beacon in the global emancipation and decolonization movements, as the Maoist guerrilla-style “People's War” became alluring in rural, underdeveloped areas of the globe, from Asia to Africa and Latin America.³ Read against this expression of soft power, *China 6 a.m.* and *Los ojos de bambú* paint clear evidence of how this

³ The international appeal of Maoism continued to grow with the Cultural Revolution in 1966, when its political and aesthetic ideology of rejection of old cultures and ideas as well as the struggle against imperialism began making its way globally, including but not limited to the Third World. See for example Galimberti, De Haro Garcia and Scott (2019) and Wolin (2010).

hospitality machine worked in its earliest moments. At the same time, however, these works demonstrate that, as much as the PRC tried to control the experiences of the travelers, their subsequent works were original interpretations that answered primarily to their own political contexts and artistic explorations, and not just expressions of Party will. As such, *China 6 a.m.* and *Los ojos de bambú* might be framed as vectors in the search for what Locane calls an “alternative modernity,” beyond Eurocentric political and aesthetic parameters (Locane 60). Or, in parallel, for new ways of configuring and interpreting the world beyond capitalist models (Ortega 2051). In this search, I argue, the interpreter figure and the interpretation scene capture the struggle over the meaning of liberation and revolution at a time when a new political superpower was emerging in the geopolitical organization of the Cold War.

A miracle of communication

Manuel Zapata Olivella (1920-2004) was a Colombian doctor, anthropologist, novelist, and playwright widely regarded for his work on recovering Afro-Caribbean folklore and traditions and exploring notions of race and coloniality in his extensive academic, cultural and literary production. His 1983 novel *Changó, el gran putas*, for instance, has been described as “postmodern, hybrid, subaltern and postcolonial, [since] it de-centers any homogenous notion of Western culture and discourse” (Luis XIV). Zapata’s travel to China in 1952 and the resulting *China 6 a.m.*, however, have not received as much critical attention as the rest of his oeuvre; this is surprising, critics of his work have argued, given the potential this journey has for understanding his aesthetic and political projects within the context of recent events in Colombia (Palacios 123). Zapata, who like many intellectuals of his time was affiliated with the Colombian Communist Party, was profoundly affected by the effects of the April 9, 1948 Bogotazo, when the capital city revolted after the assassination of progressive presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. While the Party, an urban organization, was unable to channel the anger of the masses, it was in rural areas of Colombia where ordinary people

self-organized against repressive state forces (Palacios 129). It is in this context of political crisis and mass movement that Zapata, an avid traveler who had by then already walked from Colombia to the United States, visits the recently-founded People's Republic of China, attracted by its revolution from below. More than just an ideological affinity with Maoism, his account reveals, this attraction was framed by the promise of a revolutionary joy forged in the struggle for peace.

Held from October 2-12, the 1952 Asia and Pacific Rim Peace Conference formed part of the PRC's attempt to build international support amid the economic blockade it faced for supporting the DPRK during the Korean War. The Conference brought over 400 delegates from 37 countries to Beijing under the global cause of peace, though limited, as its name specified, to those nations that bordered the Pacific Ocean; in the Americas, this included Canada, the US, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile, with Brazil a late addition (Ibarra Arana and Hao 793-794). Colombia's presence was of particular significance because, under conservative president Laureano Gómez, it was the only Latin American nation that had supported the US's war against communism in Korea with troops; given this stance, the authorities had forbidden travel to China. The Colombian delegation was led by socialist diplomat Diego Montaña Cuellar, and made up, in addition to Zapata, of writers Jorge Zalamea and Jorge Gaitán Durán, painter Alipio Jaramillo, among other intellectuals, artists and union leaders. Upon their return, Zapata recounts, they were detained and imprisoned for treason (in Palacios 131). In this way, attendance to the Peace Conference represented, more than just a chance to experience the PRC and participate in the talks, a political act of defiance against a repressive state; for Zapata, in particular, it would have been an extension of a broader reflection about what has happened in his country and the role of the committed intellectual in supporting popular mobilization and advancing the causes of ethnically marginalized groups. The spirit of a liberation born from struggle that *China, 6 a.m.* captures can be read, therefore, as an affective response to this

historical context, and the representation of the interpreter corresponds to and drives forward these feelings of revolutionary joy.

Though subtitled “Relatos” *China, 6 a.m.* is a *crónica* not unlike those written by other travelers to China during this period, which, rather than a totalizing acceptance of Maoist doctrine must be read as “a creative product of a periphery in the world republic of letters” (Hubert 339). Through an ethnographic gaze, each brief chapter paints a scene in which the narrator visits factories and schools, interviews regular citizens and offers his opinions and expresses his emotions about what he is seeing. Through the narrator’s eyes, and the interpreter’s mediation, China emerges as a site of utopian unity, represented as a clean and healthy space where its inhabitants celebrate the changes brought about by the Revolution. In this way, it follows the tropes of harmony and community that, according to Sylvia Saïtta, characterize revolutionary travel writing during these decades (17). At the same time, everyone Zapata meets remains very conscious of the country’s recent history. Though there is a clear division between the violence of the imperial past and the freedom of the socialist present, there is nevertheless in Zapata’s account an awareness that the Revolution is in process and the country still in a period of transition, and thus the struggle has not ended. It is this sense of immediacy, of living through a moment of transition, that defines the happiness that Zapata’s account exudes, garnered through observation but also, crucially, in the exchange with his Chinese interlocutors mediated by his interpreters. As such, the issue of language is present from the account’s opening scene, when Zapata and the Peace delegates board the planes from the USSR towards the PRC. Before even arriving in China Zapata grounds communication and translation as a central aspect of the travel experience that will follow: “En una lengua extraña,” he writes, “corrió entre los Delegados un rumor que parecía electrizarlos. No tardé en explicarme su inquietud cuando alguien me tradujo al castellano las palabras que producían tal fenómeno: se había anunciado que partiríamos inmediatamente” (Zapata 33). It is precisely this “electrifying” movement from ignorance to clarity that, in my reading, captures Zapata’s experience of the Chinese Revolution, and which, as is



also clear above, is crucially made possible by the act of translation. Mediation, therefore, becomes a strategy for raising a revolutionary consciousness.

This relation between translation and revolution becomes most evident in the *China 6 a.m.*'s arrival scene, with the delegates' landing in Chinese soil. As they descend, they are greeted at the airport by a display of hundreds of green flags with Pablo Picasso's drawing of the peace dove, symbol of the conference, and by children carrying flowers in welcome. When Zapata exits the plane, he is rushed by a young girl who, smiling and holding a bouquet of chrysanthemums, grabs on to him and kisses him on the cheek. The child, emanating warmth and love for humankind, in the narrator's description, turns to speak to him; at this point, a readily available interpreter steps forward, Zapata writes, "para realizar el milagro de la comprensión." The child then asks about the children of Zapata's country, to which he doubts how to respond: "Me quedé mirando sus ojos más brillantes con la expectativa de su respuesta. El joven intérprete esperaba también mis palabras" Then, he tells the child via the interpreter that children in his country suffer so much that he is not used to seeing one smile:

La pequeña dejó de mirarme para fijar sus ojos en los labios del intérprete. Esperaba ver en su cara el cambio doloroso que mis palabras le producirían, pero su rostro no se enturbió y mirándome, respondió aún más sonriente: "Nosotros también hemos sufrido mucho con la guerra, pero ahora somos felices". (Zapata 36)

Elated by the girl's response, the traveler then turns to the interpreter, who begs forgiveness for any translation issues he may have, since he has only been studying Spanish for two weeks. At the end, Zapata harkens on the young student's "humildad," as he exalts the hospitality with which they are received: "Por todos los medios se esforzaban en testimoniarnos que eran ellos los honrados con nuestra presencia, cuando en verdad éramos nosotros quienes recibíamos el homenaje de su calurosa bienvenida" (Zapata 36).

Mary Louise Pratt has argued that arrival scenes in travel writing serve to anchor the authorial voice of the traveler and set up relations of contact and terms of representation (Pratt 1986, 32). By centering the figure of the interpreter and the act of mediation in the manner described above, the arrival scene in *China 6 a.m.* creates a parallel between effective translation and the success of the Chinese Revolution in creating a happy, healthy, and welcoming society. The use of the word “miracle” to describe the encounter captures the utopian nature of the meeting, where visitors, locals and mediators interact harmoniously, as if perfectly executing their parts in a choreography of peace. But, significantly, this miracle does not mean that China’s radical transformation communication, represented here in the act of interpretation, is effortless or automatic. On the contrary, this scene is built up through tension and expectation, captured in how the players react to the process of mediation and interact with one another. Their bodies respond to the passage of time and demonstrate a sense of anticipation of when or whether the translation will take place, as when Zapata stares at the girl while she expectantly looks at the interpreter’s lips (“Me quedé mirando sus ojos”...“fijar sus ojos en los labios”). These glances, gestures and emotions demonstrate the embodied effect of interpretation, which, to go back to Cronin, emerges as more than just a verbal transfer of information or a solely rational, intellectual experience. The ultimate, successful resolution of the encounter out of this tension reveals how the Revolution, far from a completed achievement, is a steady, often difficult, progression from imperial past to socialist modernity. In this way, the notion of miracle in *China 6 a.m.* is framed in terms of struggle, a political conflict as much as a language one that is nevertheless joyful. Revolutionary peace, therefore, can only emerge in this struggle for understanding, where the interpreter plays a fundamental role.

Following the processual nature of this first scene, the remainder of Zapata’s narrative is rhetorically structured in three stages that bring the traveler from doubting to trusting the interpreter qua embodiment of the Revolution. It begins with the moment of discovery and surprise as the traveler encounters an



element of the new Chinese society that catches his attention, is followed by a brief period of ambivalence as he is unable to fully grasp how this element actually works or how it can exist within a revolutionary society, and finally closes with the decisive explanation, when either he himself or more often the interpreter clarifies the issue and reveals how this new China is building a more egalitarian, socialist society. For example, as they venture into the streets of Beijing, the delegates are approached by rickshaw drivers who offer to transport them through the city. Zapata, pained by the prevalence of what he sees as a degrading and abusive remainder of the nation's imperial past, exclaims his surprise and wonders how this can exist in a socialist society. The interpreter, always understanding and “con paciencia,” asks his interlocutor to accompany him aboard one, explaining that this is due to the slow –but steady– transformation of the country, and that the rickshaw drivers continued to work in this manner until they could be relocated to bicycle and automobile factories (Zapata 40). In this way, the narrator's initial ambivalence is cleared away, as he feels “vergüenza por la manera brusca como había expresado mi sorpresa por la subsistencia de las *rickshaws*,” and his discomfort turns to happiness as he realizes these are just the growing pains of a revolutionary nation (40). Throughout, the interpreter remains a guiding figure, his calm demeanor further reinforcing the pedagogic feel of the scene. Like in the arrival scene, translation becomes an embodied, affective process, flowing from the narrator's pain to shame and then to exaltation, guided by the gestures that accompany the teaching moment: the interpreter's slight smile at the traveler's doubts, his vivacious responses, his worried glances as he fears Zapata may not understand his limited Spanish. At the end the miracle is successfully carried out, as the traveler comprehends both the translation of language as well as the inner workings of the revolutionary process.

As shown in the arrival scene these interpreters were not professional translators but had received some language training, either in recent conflicts or immediately before the peace conference, and came from different sectors of society. Zapata even provides the names of some of these young men and women

(Ho-Chi-Ling, “Juanito,” Mon Fu) telling some of their stories and their reasons for taking up these positions. In one scene, he realizes that the young woman serving as their guide and interpreter through an oil refinery herself had fought in the liberation of the deposit from the invading Japanese army: “Por primera vez reparé con atención en la pequeña muchacha de movimientos ágiles que nos servía de guía...expresaba su propia opinion de combatiente, tal vez ligada a las brigadas que liberaron aquella mina. ‘Como ustedes pueden verlo, todavía estamos en pleno combate’” (Zapata 67). In another instance, as they arrive in another village, the narrator sees the excitement in the interpreter’s face and figures out it is the young man’s home: “Era un joven de baja estatura, de cabeza irregular y muchas cicatrices de viruela en la cara...ahora estaba vinculado a la propaganda de la Reforma Agraria entre los campesinos” (72). And elsewhere, when the delegates meet a textile factory owner whose business had increased with government regulation, he reveals that their interpreter is actually his son: “Hasta entonces ninguno de nosotros pensó que aquel cicerone que vestía igual que los otros intérpretes, pudiera ser el hijo del propietario de aquella inmensa fábrica” (64). For Zapata, these interpreters embody in their own life stories the miracle of the Revolution, again, not as a victory already achieved but always in continuous struggle, “en pleno combate,” as the interpreter in the refinery states. That they come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds is, for the traveler, further proof of the fraternal spirit of a revolution that brings together groups that, elsewhere, would be in competition. Here, Zapata sees the very idea of class struggle being replaced by class solidarity under socialism.⁴

For these reasons the interpreters are, as he calls them, “los soldados del idioma,” and to whom he dedicates the concluding chapter of *China 6 a.m.* In his clearest affirmation about the political nature of their role in enacting the fraternal mission of the conference, Zapata states the young translators “han hecho de las

⁴ Robert Loh, in his 1962 account *Escape from Red China*, wrote that in the theatrical montage put on for foreign guests, he played the role of a reformed capitalist who was welcoming the socialist revolution. Perhaps the factory owner Zapata met was playing a similar role to Loh. See also Lovell 2015.

lenguas extranjeras no solo un medio de comunicarse con el extraño, sino un instrumento político puesto al servicio de la paz y la fraternidad de los pueblos” (Zapata 127). As stated earlier, it is likely that many of these interpreters saw in their role the possibility of gaining status within the CCP, reaffirming Pöchhaker’s argument about the ideological nature of interpretation; for Zapata, however, what is significant is that their dedication comes not from following Party directives to show the best of the PRC, but rather from their own modesty and total commitment to the cause of peace. As he gets ready to leave the conference, an interpreter asks the traveler if he thinks they have done their job appropriately: “Habríamos querido hacer mucho más, el triunfo de la paz significa para nosotros la vida misma de nuestra patria” (129). This portrayal of the interpreters as selfless guardians appears again when Zapata tells of how two of the young language students stayed at the bedside of two sick delegates in a clinic, “atendiendo la menor solicitud de los enfermos como no lo hubieran hecho sus propios hijos. Día y noche, cada suspiro, cada palabra pronunciada entre sueños era recogida por aquellos amigos en vigilia como centinelas en un puesto de avanzada” (130). Like in the rest of the account, the imagery of war and conflict is used here to demonstrate a commitment to peace, where successful communication is likened to a battle and, simultaneously, to the act of caregiving that follows. To be sure, here as elsewhere in his account Zapata falls back on orientalist tropes to describe the interpreters, saying for instance that their modesty is “heredada en tantos milenios de sabia humildad” (128). Yet this characterization does not supersede that of the interpreter as the watchguard (“centinela”) of the Revolution, in their multiple roles as soldier, worker, teacher and caregiver. For Zapata, these language warriors stand as the ultimate examples of a revolutionary attitude in the struggle for peace.

China 6 a.m. ends in an emotional note. The closing scene shows the delegates boarding their plane, waving goodbye to their translators and unable to hold back tears, given that “se habían convertido en algo más íntimo que nuestros propios corazones” (Zapata 130). This is a fitting end to a travel account characterized by these forms of affective responses, as smiles, laughs and tears, and

expressions of joy, sadness and anger mark the experience of the narrator in China. In fact, at one point while talking to some workers in a mining camp about the changes in their labor conditions, the traveler remarks that the interpreter asked the miners to slow down because he couldn't take notes fast enough, and yet, "el calor de sus frases no lograba perderse en los cambios de traducción" (102). The warmth that the worker irradiates is just enough for Zapata to understand him, even without comprehending his words. Language, then, does not contain this revolutionary joy, which overflows verbal comprehension and bursts through as pure affect that envelops the traveler and grants him understanding of the struggle for peace. However, this does not mean that the interpreter's role has ceased to be relevant, as the next line makes clear: "Me habría gustado entender directamente el idioma de aquel hombre para gozar de la palabra emocionada con que entusiasmaba a sus compañeros oyentes" (102). Ultimately, it is spoken language that, for Zapata, can best communicate the revolutionary experience, the "palabra emocionada" that translator must find a way to ferry across. The struggle the young interpreter faces to do so strengthens his position as a language warrior.

For Manuel Zapata, attendance to the 1952 Peace Conference in the context of the recent political events in Colombia meant a chance to observe how a radically different revolutionary process from below might play out. In contrast to a Colombian Communist Party unable to channel the constituent power unleashed after the murder of Gaitán, in China Zapata witnesses a productive collaboration between urban and rural sectors, industrial workers and peasants, capitalists and socialists, young and old. In a highly emotional account, he centers the interpreter as the mediator between this emerging society and the outside world, a warrior for peace who is a living witness of a revolutionary transformation and whose labor results in a miracle of communication. This, as well as the Revolution itself, are not a given: their miraculous nature rests in a conflict for global peace and an antiimperialist future. In China, Zapata envisions a utopian horizon anchored in the possibility of understanding, a politics of fraternity and joy born out of revolutionary struggle.

A montage of friendship

Mercedes Valdivieso (1924-1993) was a Chilean writer often regarded as representative of the so-called “generación del 50” and whose work dealt primarily with the role of women in a patriarchal society. Unlike earlier Chilean feminist writers whose work tended towards introspection, Valdivieso’s novels, starting with her 1961 *La brecha*, outwardly challenged the societal roles demanded of a woman as wife and mother, disrupting ideals of femininity by foregrounding themes such as divorce, adultery and abortion (Guerra 8). According to Mónica Barrientos, the social and political dimensions of the era had a direct effect on how women writers conceived their own work and role in the global liberation movement, looking to move beyond the thematic of the domestic and into spheres dominated, until that point, almost entirely by men (Barrientos 269). In this context, Valdivieso stood out also for her role as editor of several cultural publications, among them *Adán*, directed towards “the Latin American man” and which sought to challenge social and gender roles through the use, for instance, of sexually explicit photography. Belonging to a wealthy family, she nevertheless maintained strong leftist ideals, which brought her to the PRC in 1960 along with her husband Jaime, for a ten-month stay to experience and write about the Revolution. *Los ojos de bambú*, while a work of fiction, is written in an autobiographical, testimonial tone, and Clara, its protagonist stands in for Valdivieso’s authorial voice (Amaro 261). The novel, therefore, captures its author’s time in the PRC, revealing the gender dynamics operating both in her conservative society and in revolutionary China, as well as her convictions about emancipatory politics and art. Perhaps because of this unexpected “intrusion” of a woman writer into a male-centered arena, *Los ojos de bambú* was poorly received at its time of publication and is almost forgotten from the author’s oeuvre (251). While much has been written about this gender dimension of the novel, in particular the struggles of its protagonist Clara to defend her ideological and aesthetic positions, in this section I

argue that her relation with the language interpreter is a central battleground in her struggle against a repressive state.

In the novel, Clara is a painter from a well-off family who stays in China for an artistic residency, invited by her friend Germán, a fellow Chilean and loyal ally of the Revolution. Enamored by millenarian Chinese culture and spousing socialist ideals, much to the chagrin of her wealthy father, Clara arrives at the International Hotel, where she joins Germán and around fifty other foreign guests, including eight Latin Americans. Among this group she befriends Fanny, a young woman teaching Spanish at the Foreign Language Institute, and the Spanish couple Vicente and Marta, committed socialists who are also teaching the language and working as translators. As Clara's own name— as well as the reference to sight in the novel's title – suggests, it soon becomes clear to her that the revolutionary discourse of political and artistic solidarity being put forward by CCP authorities as well as by Germán is not only limiting the individual emancipatory potential of the artist, but also erasing Chinese culture in favor of Eurocentric intellectual models. In this realization, in a narrative peppered with metaphors to eyes and seeing, Clara becomes increasingly rebellious, choosing to leave the enclosed space of the Hotel and venture out, by herself or in the company of her friends, to see the “real” China, beyond the discursive and physical limits imposed by the state. In these outings, she experiences a society still tied to what she sees as millenarian traditions and customs, attending street magic shows, visiting antique shops, and choosing to ride in a rickshaw – which, as we saw in *China 6 a.m.* was scandalous to Zapata. Like the Colombian, she is assigned an interpreter, the young Wang Te-en, who serves as her guide and mediator; unlike Zapata, Clara, as she begins to question the official narrative of the Revolution, goes on to reject her interpreter's labor, who instead becomes an impediment to her artistic project and her own understanding of China. This culminates in Wang's reveal that he is reporting back to the CCP authorities all their conversations and outings, an admission the interpreter makes matter-of-factly and surprised at Clara's outrage. This, however, does not mean a rejection of Wang himself, whom she continues to refer to as her



friend, but rather of the state narrative he embodies. Ultimately, Clara decides to end her visit and return home, nevertheless reaffirming her love for China and her commitment to the humanist ideals of social transformation the Revolution had set out to achieve.

If Manuel Zapata's visit to China was framed by the discourse of peace, Clara's stay comes under the banner of friendship. As mentioned above, as part of its soft power strategy the CCP sought to make their foreign guests' international friends who would then share the official revolutionary discourse back at home. In the novel, Clara experiences this primarily through her residence in the International Hotel, a stand in for the actual Friendship Hotel which since its opening in 1954 housed foreign visitors, including Valdivieso herself, in their diplomatic and cultural stays (Montt Strabucchi "Yo amo a China", 102).⁵ The Hotel, according to state authorities (through Wang), was meant to give the "amigos extranjeros" a total "Western" comfort (Valdivieso 34). However, Clara grows increasingly restless in the environment, as the Hotel comes to represent her alienation from the outside, "real" China, as well as the pressure she feels to conform to state directives and aesthetic models: "una indefinible angustia que parecía brotar de los pasillos interminables, de la curiosidad ajena, del cemento gris, helado y repetido en los numerosos bloques cuyo conjunto componía el Hotel Internacional, construidos tras una inmensa área cerrada, lejos de la ciudad" (35). Despite the discourse of friendship that Party officials reiterate, the Hotel becomes a hostile space for Clara, who in addition to feeling continuously watched begins to develop physical malaises and artist's block, which impedes her from painting at all during her stay. As her friendship with the PRC loyalist Germán becomes strained, she grows closer to Fanny, Vicente and Marta, all of whom share, to varying degrees, her uncertainties and discomforts. This separation between "friends" and "enemies," according to Carl Schmitt the distinction at the core of

⁵ See also Pablo and Yuri Doudchitzky's film *Hotel de la Amistad* (2013). As children in the 1960s, the brothers lived in the Friendship Hotel with their parents, Argentine Communist militants who worked as Spanish teachers.

politics, comes to dominate how the relationships in the Hotel are demarcated. This is also where Wang comes in, as he repeatedly tries to advise Clara to steer away from Vicente and remain closer to Germán, “un gran amigo de China” (141).⁶

As Clara’s assigned interpreter and guide, Wang’s objective is to make her stay comfortable, that is, to make her feel like a true friend of China. This entails, therefore, a role as linguistic-cultural mediator who, in addition to translating the language is also tasked with clarifying the Revolution and the emerging socialist nation to the artist, much like Zapata’s interpreters discussed above. Wang is twenty-four, the seventh son of a working-class family from Shanghai who had wanted to study a technical career but who, seeing the country’s need to “hablar con el mundo” had chosen to enter the Foreign Languages Institute instead (Valdivieso 67). As critics have noted, Clara’s descriptions of Wang reveal an orientalist gaze, as she tends to infantilize and essentialize the interpreter even when she discovers he has been reporting on her (Montt Strabucchi 2020, 108). In fact, out of all of Clara’s relationships at the Hotel, her friendship with Wang is perhaps the most fluctuating, since it oscillates between her expressions of tenderness (“ternura”) towards the young man and his efforts to learn Spanish, and distrust and anger as she discovers his official mission. Though never changing her view of him as a “buen muchacho,” she nevertheless cannot but be taken aback by the “irrefrenable soberbia” of his “mundo hermético y limitado” and the CCP leadership’s “principios inflexibles” he would not betray (Valdivieso 69). On their relationship, Lorena Amaro has argued Wang’s reporting on Clara demonstrates that, even if the protagonist had at first felt herself superior to the young man, his reveal reinforces a patriarchal order in which he obtains control over her, much as in the other male characters in the novel attempt repeatedly to do (Amaro 260). To this I want to add that Clara’s growing realization of the theatrical montage of

⁶ It is also important to note the broader geopolitical implications of this discourse in *Los ojos de bambú*, especially in the context of the Sino-Soviet split and the PRC’s support of the Cuban Revolution, both of which occur during the course of the novel and generate strong sentiments of repudiation towards the Soviets and solidarity with the Cubans.

hospitality she experiences comes through the renouncement, and ultimately the abandonment, of her reliance on Wang's translation services.

Already from the opening moments of the novel, Clara begins to feel physically and emotionally burdened by the presence of her interpreter. During a visit from the deputy director of the Fine Arts museum, her host institution, Wang begins to fulfill his duties, translating for Clara the official's desire for the mutual understanding between their people, to be made possible concretely through himself, the interpreter. The protagonist, who by this early scene has already expressed her frustration and inability to work, wishes she could speak to the deputy directly, without the need for Wang, in order to gain a more direct understanding of the Chinese art world, which she ascertains the man possesses. In fact, "mantener una conversación por intermedio del muchacho se había convertido para Clara en una especie de tormento. Sentía que la calidez del contacto humano se helaba a través del interprete. Esa charla indirecta de le hacia molesta y fatigosa al cabo de un rato" (Valdivieso 56). Far from Zapata's first interpretation scene at the airport, characterized by warmth and physical connection between all parties, here Clara feels "cold" and "tormented," unable to establish a bond with the official and, through him, Chinese culture and a renewed drive to paint. The role of the interpreter functions here like a barrier that impedes understanding and collaboration, paradoxically for Clara undoing the deputy's wish stated moments earlier. Matters are made worse soon after when, in a conversation with Fanny, Clara discovers that the deputy speaks English (a language they have in common) but had chosen to utilize the interpreter to talk to her. Her feelings when she learns this further capture her realization of the theatrical nature of her visit: "Le parecía de pronto que la habían engañado, burlado, y sintió crecer en ella una rabia súbita e intensa. Apretó los puños y los párpados y contuvo la respiración" (Valdivieso 59). As in the previous scene, this produces in her a strong physical and emotional reaction; her clenched fists and rising rage communicate her restlessness at understanding how, far from serving as a conduit to a revolutionary experience, the act of interpretation here is a channel of state control. If, as Ana Leunda has argued,

Valdivieso's novel visibilizes the metaphorical dimension of the (female) body, here this is made clear in Clara's response to the montage of communication she is put through (Leunda 68). The failure of trust, the basis for the interpretation contract according to Payàs, results in the protagonist's physical deterioration.

This leads Clara to forego Wang's skills, both out of distrust and because she believes the interpreter cannot grasp her communicative necessities. When, given her debilitating mental state, she decides to go to a doctor, she rejects the possibility of asking Wang to go with her since he would not understand her condition. Thinking back on a conversation they had had regarding novel approaches to childhood education, Clara remembers that he had not grasped the meaning of the word "psychological." The word, she thinks, "No estaba en su vocabulario y ni siquiera lograba entender su significado, aunque Clara tratara de explicárselo. No estaba en su vocabulario, ni en español ni en chino" (Valdivieso 67). Beyond just lexical limitations, for Clara the issue goes deeper, as Wang (and, by extension, the state hospitality discourse) believes that material comfort equals wellbeing; any mention to the psychological, this seems to imply, is individual and thus bourgeois, and thus has no place in the official revolutionary narrative. Later, when Clara decides to go out with Fanny and explore that "real China" she so longs for, she once again doubts whether to call on the interpreter to accompany them. Her friend laughs off the idea: "¿Te imaginas su cara en estas correrías?" (129). Again, Wang becomes unnecessary, and his language skills serve as a barrier rather than a channel to understanding. While in Zapata's account the facial expressiveness of the interpreters emanate affect and create a revolutionary connection, here Wang's impassiveness captures the distance between the travelers and a Party discourse that seeks to hide traditional Chinese culture. In fact, it is during this outing through regular neighborhoods that Clara begins to understand what lies beyond the Hotel's artifice, and her experience becomes "un lente a través del cual entendía mejor algunos rasgos actuales de la juventud china," Wang Te-en included (137). That is, instead of the Wang serving as her linguistic-cultural interpreter it is her unmediated experience which allows her to comprehend the

reason why a young man would choose to enroll in a position of service to the state. Her lack of need for the interpreter shows her disenchantment with the Party, and foreshadows her resolution to leave the PRC.

Clara's decision comes as she realizes that China's position in the global stage is not one of friendship or collaboration but of influence. In its attempt to reach out to the socialist world, wresting power away from the USSR in the context of the Sino-Soviet split, the Party commissions Wang to translate a propaganda article into Spanish. The interpreter then asks Clara to serve as his editor and correct the most glaring translation mistakes in the text, which German has signed off on for publication. In doing so, she discovers that the text "daba consejos y normas revolucionarias desde la cima de su 'verdad indiscutible'...siempre la imposibilidad de equivocarse, la posesión de la verdad absoluta" (Valdivieso 143-144). Among "adjetivos amistosos," she calls out her pro-Party friend Germán, is the fact that the PRC is using its platform and discourse of friendship to claim absolute truth over the meaning of revolution. Clara declines to edit Wang's text, sending it back to him untouched. With her refusal, the illusion of translation as comprehension, and thus friendship, is broken; not only does she stop calling on his services, she also ends their contractual relationship of mediation by refusing to collaborate with him and the Party. In doing so, she arrives at her decision to leave, which comes soon after. Calling a final meeting with the deputy director of the Museum, she refuses to talk to him through Wang, knowing the official is fluent in English: "Reitero lo ahora solicitado a través de Wang Te-en y quiero manifestar mi decisión de no continuar esta entrevista si usted y yo no podemos hablar usando este idioma común" (198). By using English, a language Wang does not know and is taken aback by, Clara continues to break with the need for a mediation that only leads, for her, to confusion and falseness. In other words, she calls out the montage of communication between them, for which she immediately feels emotional relief, "alivio" to express her feelings "sin las acostumbradas dilaciones y rodeos." After listening to her resolution to return to her country, the deputy laments that "usted no nos ha comprendido como esperábamos" (199). This comprehension, of course,



was always grounded on the state's definition of it, that is, an indisputable and unquestioning acceptance of Party mandates.

Yet what is significant about Clara's departure is her stated commitment to the ideals of revolution, in her perspective a profoundly humanist enterprise. Unlike Zapata, this is no longer grounded on the possibility of communication but exactly the opposite: "*no existen todavía posibilidades de diálogo,*" she states (Valdivieso 203, cursives in original). It is precisely in this negation where a seemingly contradictory chance for solidarity arises, not in the success of dialogue but in its very failure, in the "not yet" (*todavía*) that nevertheless leaves the door open for a future understanding, capturing the sense of the utopian in itself. This is why, despite Wang's role in the Party apparatus that ultimately brought her to the decision to leave China, she still regrets saying goodbye to her interpreter: "*Mañana diré adiós a Wang Te-en, mi compañero, quien, como yo, siente de veras separarse*" (203, cursives in the original). For Clara, and Wang, there remains a friendship, a bond, that transcends the political in terms solely of cultural diplomacy and reaches towards the political as affective connection. A bond that is best exemplified in the final lines of the novel, as Clara draws "dos líneas muy simples que se encontraban en un punto. Uno de los pocos signos que aprendiera y cuyo significado en chino abarcaba toda la especie humana; su significado era 'hombre'" (204). Drawing the Chinese sign for "human" (人), Clara reflects upon the meeting point between the two lines, also the connection between her and Wang, her friends, China, and humanity in general. Of course, as argued earlier, Clara (a stand in for her author) often cannot see beyond her own class privilege, and this humanism, especially her feelings of fraternity towards Wang, might also reveal its own limitations towards other manifestations of power (Amaro 263). Nevertheless, for the protagonist, as well as for her author, these final moments of the novel serve to envision a revolutionary horizon beyond the montage of the interpreter, a form of political and aesthetic solidarity that transcends the ideological framework of the Party's Revolution.

Conclusion

For Manuel Zapata Olivella and Mercedes Valdivieso, their invitations and subsequent travels to the New China meant a chance to experience a new revolutionary process from up close, embedding themselves in a simultaneously millenarian and forward-looking culture. For the PRC, they played a crucial function as cultural ambassadors, carrying out, in their visits, stays, and in particular their return to their countries, a role as communicators of an official discourse of solidarity in which China occupied center stage. Yet, as I have argued here, their visits and resulting texts are not merely regurgitations of CCP ideology but rather expressions of their own political and aesthetic projects, tied to their specific local contexts and ways of envisioning their role as committed intellectuals. Thus, *China 6 a.m.* and *Los ojos de bambú* might be read as chronicles of PRC-Latin American cultural diplomacy, as well as, perhaps more importantly, expressions of their authors' search for aesthetic and political alternatives as well desire for individual and collective transformation. After all, as the Spaniard Marta tells Clara before her departure, "Uno después de vivir y trabajar en China nunca más vuelve a ser el mismo" (Valdivieso 195).

In the case of the doctor and writer Zapata, traveling in the early years of the Chinese Revolution, his visit was marked by the assurance that liberation could only be achieved by the masses. The political climate in Colombia after the Bogotazo and his perceived failure of the Communist Party had led him to look for alternative revolutionary models from below, and in China, he met everyday people who found joy by taking part of the antiimperialist, socialist struggle for peace. In the face of this joyful struggle, Zapata understands for himself that his role as a socially committed intellectual must come by way of literature and culture, rather than medicine, which he grows to reject as purely empiricist. Learning about stories of Chinese scientists turned writers, he determines he must "encauzar todas mis fuerzas en la lucha del escritor contra las condiciones sociales que agobian a los hombres," since their example "constituía una crítica violenta a mis vacilaciones" (Zapata 125). Spurred by this realization, Zapata continues in his political project

of visibilizing the struggles as well as the cultural fecundity of his country's popular classes, seeking to further its connections with the Chinese people. In 1956, he would return for a two-year tour, bringing folkloric dance and song ensembles to the PRC in a new demonstration of cultural diplomacy (Hernández Ortiz 284). In this way, Zapata's experience of a revolution from below had a direct impact on his political and aesthetic trajectory.

Though Valdivieso's stay came only a few years after Zapata's, she was nevertheless more closely exposed to the cracks in the PRC's hospitality machine. If, as it has been argued here, Clara is an extension of the author's own experiences and discoveries, then the protagonist's slow realization of the montage she is being put through might also shed light on Valdivieso's visit. In her position as "friend of China," Clara begins to see that the narrative of joy and peace is clouded by the famines caused by the Great Leap Forward and the breakdown of internationalism brought by the Sino-Soviet split. There is even, towards the end of the novel, a foreshadowing to the Cultural Revolution and the radicalization of youth in the purge of the enemies of Mao. Going back to the Hotel one night, she is attacked by children who think her a Soviet citizen; "¡Mala! ¡Mala! ¡Mala!" they yell as they throw snowballs at her, in a clear departure from the teary-eyed children that embraced Zapata as he got off the plane (Valdivieso 184). It is this ideological nature of friendship and enmity that Valdivieso's novel attempts to disentangle and, ultimately, break through. In doing so, she reaffirms her commitment to the unity of mankind, one that would no longer be separated by geopolitical distinctions, or on ethnic or gender grounds, but framed by a common struggle for human dignity.

And yet these realizations or transformations are not possible without the mediation of the interpreters. Far from conceiving the interpreter as a silent or invisible figure, for both authors and their narrative voices they perform a fundamental function in the process of communication and, in doing so, lead them towards their political reflections and discoveries. Because they are not only mediating between languages but also customs, traditions, and a revolutionary experience as a whole, the interpreters hold power over the foreign guests. As

mouthpieces of the state, they are tasked with presenting the Revolution in an accessible and desirable manner. They do so by establishing contracts of trust with the visitors, in part, by presenting their own lives as proof of its success. They straddle between their role as teachers and guardians but also spies, and they are simultaneously caring friends and sober warriors. Vis-à-vis these interpreters, Zapata and Valdivieso's characters frame their revolutionary, socialist and humanist ideals, not taking anything at face value but rather interrogating and examining their guides, negotiating what they see with what they hear, measuring their local realities to this brave new world. In doing so, they arrive at their own, divergent conclusions. Read from this relational perspective, Zapata's miraculous encounter and Valdivieso's discovery of the montage are grounded on how they respond to this process of mediation. And, in this way, *China 6 a.m.* and *Los ojos de bambú* emerge as accounts about the political nature of mediation, and how the meaning of liberation and utopia was a perpetually contested signifier in the geopolitical conflict of the Cold War.

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