# Representations of China in Latin American Literature (1987–2016)

## María Montt Strabucchi

reseñado por

*Chenchen Wang*
University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain

*Representations of China in Latin American Literature (1987-2016)*, by Maria Montt Strabucchi, is the first systematic study of the image of China in contemporary Latin American fiction. This book uses "China" as a lens to challenge Eurocentric notions of the "other," focusing on the production of intra-Latin American difference through a generic construction of "China." The novelty of this book lies in its rejection of traditional national perspectives and dualistic structures, and in its re-discussion of Chinese narratives in Latin America from a regional and thematic perspective, deconstructing the Western-constructed "China" and thus challenging the notion of identity under this essentialist conception. The novels discussed become a new space for writers to explore the mestizaje of hybrid identities in Latin America.

Montt Strabucchi begins her introduction by explaining the importance of studying Latin American novels that engage with the "Chinese imaginary." Because such works "reflect upon homogenizing assumptions of both China and Latin America, they also expose the ways in which Latin America has regularly failed to engage with China itself and not with its stereotyped image" (5). Echoing Edward Said's critique of stereotypical understandings of the "East" in the European context, the absence of a single perspective or a first site leads to a lack of authenticity as "China" becomes a cultural artefact to be consumed in the process of being stripped and extracted. This inauthenticity leads to cultural misunderstandings and distorted representations.

There are three basic axes in Montt's analytical framework. The discussion of the symbolic object "China" is the subject of the first chapter. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's concept of the "fetishized stranger," Montt analyzes the exoticization and mystification

of "China" in novels by César Aira, Alberto Laiseca, Mario Bellatin and Eduardo Berti. Highlighting the need to deconstruct this fetishization, Montt uses a Bakhtinian framework to show how "narrative aesthetic works (de)constructively in these novels" in ways that both participate in Orientalist discourse and self-reflexively confront stereotypical and misinformed representations (47). Literary expression thus emerges as a field in which the discursive construction of China as an "imagined country" in the Latin American context can be critically examined (41).

The narrative thread of the second chapter is about race and the Chinese community in Latin America. Focusing on works by Aira, Ariel Magnus and Cristina Rivera Garza, the chapter views Chinatown and the Chinese community in Buenos Aires and Mexico City as cultural structures that transcend geographical concepts. Through the mirror of China, Montt intends to highlight the problems of racism and social inequality that exist in Latin American society. At the same time, the chapter uses Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of community to find a more inclusive and open relationship against the marginalization of heterogeneous groups. Overall, the discussion of racial homogenization in this chapter is a critique of the dominant discourse of racial homogenization in Latin America, emphasizing the transformative role of the Chinese community in Latin American urban landscapes, and demonstrating an acknowledgement of the connections and shared experiences of Chinese diaspora communities across the globe.

The four novels by Santiago Gamboa, Ximena Sánchez Echenique and Gabriel Peveroni examined in the final chapter position travelling to China as a theme that disrupts pre-existing perceptions and fosters a cosmopolitan worldview. Highlighting transnationalism and mobility, these novels call for a reconsideration of the notion of community. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's study of migration and estrangement narratives, Montt views travelers as "mobile subjects" who may refuse to accept being the Other and instead seek a form of "being-in-common" through their willingness to traverse different cultural and geographical spaces and rejection of rigid boundaries. The call for Latin American identity within the framework of "nomadic subjects" underscores a vision of humanity that embraces commonality and shared existence.

The epilogue suggests that there is actually no equal ground for enacting Ahmed's "stranger encounter." The diversity and differences of Latin American countries reflect the inherent complexity of China's cultural representation in Latin America, and the static "otherness" imposed on China bears the imprint of unequal social power structures. In attempting to change the racial hegemony of Latin America, these novels have awakened a cosmopolitan perspective that transcends both local and global boundaries. Thus, Montt suggests that "cosmopolitanism's transnational approach allows for a challenge to Western hegemony and Eurocentric worldviews" (27). Admittedly, the book does not include all Latin American works of fiction associated with 'China', such as Isabel Allende's *Hija de la Fortuna*. It is also unfortunate that works by Latin American diaspora Chinese, such as the first generation of immigrants represented by Siu Kam Wen and the younger generation of millennials, are not considered.

In short, this book offers a fresh shuffle and discussion of the complexity and diversity of Chineseness in Latin American narrative fiction. Employing "China" to resist racial essentialist constructions of Latin American identity and mestizaje, these literary works

attempt to provide readers with new perspectives on identity formation and community building in the Latin American context by focusing on the dynamic connection between discourses of "otherness" and community identity. The book provides an illuminating example for future research on Latin American literature, race, and Chinese diaspora, and is a successful model of interdisciplinary research. Most importantly, it reveals a body of work interested in moving beyond essentialist Orientalism to a more authentic understanding of China itself.