Introduction

Otherness, Extraneousness, and Unawareness in Inter–Cultural Semiotics

Massimo Leone[1]

> A veil of wild mist
> hides the tall bridge.
> By a rock on the west bank,
> I ask a fisher boat:
> "The peach petals keep floating
> with the water the whole day.
> On which side of the clear stream
> can I find the cave?"[2]

Abstract: The essay pinpoints the core mission of cultural semiotics as an attempt at problematizing aspects of social life that, appear trivial to most because they have been "naturalized" but that, if read through the lenses of e discipline, che reveal the deep structures that produce meaning in a society and its culture. From this point of view, cultural semiotics is able to perceive otherness and, therefore, meaning, there where common sense would see just banal familiarity. To this purpose, the essay emphasizes the pervasiveness of the experience of otherness (the face of the other, the self as other, but especially otherness that emerges through media from the creativity of artists); it articulates three levels of unfamiliarity: otherness, extraneousness, and unawareness. Through examples taken from Chinese literature and China's everyday life in comparative perspective with the West, the essay suggests that, whereas otherness can be appropriated through a preexistent code, and whereas extraneousness requires the creation of a new code of translation, unawareness implies the incapacity to perceive

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1. Shanghai University, University of Turin.
2. 桃花溪: "隱隱飛橋隔野煙 / 石磯西畔問漁船 / 桃花盡日隨流水 / 洞在清溪何處邊"; Zhang Xu (Chinese: 張旭, fl. 8ᵗʰ century), court name Bogao [伯高]; English trans. by Edward C. Chang.

naturalized otherness, until an extraordinary experience (travel, for instance) leads to its epiphany. Whilst otherness and extraneousness are discovered in alien cultures, unawareness is revealed in relation to one's own culture, thanks to the encounter with the alien one.

1. Encountering the Other

Cultural semiotics often problematizes aspects of social life that seem trivial to most and, as a consequence, do not become objects of investigation for more traditional disciplines. Such aspects, however, are not void of interest per se but because they have been interiorized as second nature and common sense by an entire collectivity. They seem as natural as breathing or sleeping but they are actually not. On the contrary, analyzing them often reveals truths about a society that are all the more surprising since they do not explicitly manifest themselves anymore but remain in the exclusive domain of the implicit or even unconscious assumptions of ideology. It is overly difficult to become aware of these assumptions by simply remaining in one's society and observing it, albeit with dispassionate neutrality, acumen, and sophisticated analytical instruments. Indeed, the more such implicit features are general and abstract, the more they will exclusively reveal themselves in very specific circumstances, which usually go under the somewhat rhetorical label of "encounter with the other"[3].

One can come across otherness in many ways. It is, actually, quite hard not to have an experience of it even in the most crystallized routines[4]. The bodies of other individuals, and especially their faces (Leone, 2017), continuously provide one with an inexhaustible

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3. On the topic of "anthropological translation", see Leone, 2015, *Anthropological*.

4. On the semiotics of routines, see Leone, 2011; on the emergence of significance, Leone, 2017, *On Insignificance*.

source of variety, which seems to be a foundational principle of cultures but also and foremost of the nature itself upon which cultures build their linguistic and semiotic constructions. Moreover, not only the bodies of the others, but also one's own body is the source of a quotidian experience of otherness. Time, in fact, and the changing of things through it, introduces variety in continuity. As soon as media enter the semiotic existence of an individual and its community, then, otherness is encountered beyond natural forms, in the form of the creativity offered by other people through a variety of genres, texts, and styles. Each novel is and must be different from the others; the same goes for most contemporary creative and artistic objects: that which is expected from them is exactly the ability of displacing receivers, albeit for a brief moment, from the domain of the familiar to that of the unknown or even of the disquieting[5].

On the one hand, such mediated encounters with otherness cannot be a complete shock: poets can sometimes express feelings in a revolutionary way, yet they must somehow coat this revolution within a modicum of ordinary language, if some sort of communication with readers is to take place (Riffaterre, 1978). On the other hand, the extent of this unfamiliarity increases as texts from distant lands, times, and especially from distant cultures, are received. For a present–day Italian reader unfamiliar with the Chinese language, culture, and poetry, for instance, a poem by Wang Wei[6] might sound exceedingly exotic, to the point that many, if not most of the poet's lyrics will not be understood or will be misunderstood; here follows, for instance, Wang Wei's famous poem *Mount Zhongnan* [終南山]:

> The Tai Yi peak
> is near the capital of Heaven.
> Its range stretches
> all the way to the coast.

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5. On the semiotics of innovation, see Leone, 2015, *The Semiotics*.
6. In Chinese: 王維; Qi County, Jinzhong, Shanxi, 699 – Xi'an, Shaanxi, 759 (Tang Dinasty).

As I look back,
the white clouds are close in.
As I look close up,
the blue mists suddenly disappear.
The middle ridge divides into
two ever–changing sceneries.
On dark or clear days
each valley has a different view.
Wanting to put up
at some one's place for the night,
I ask a woodcutter
on the other side of the stream[7].

2. A Typology of Unfamiliarity

Unfamiliarity, however, must be arranged along a spectrum that could be conceived as symmetric to the one devised by Franco–Lithuanian semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas so as to investigate the logics of meaning formation (Greimas, 1970).

2.1. *Otherness*

Accordingly, the most superficial level of non–intelligibility would be that of the textual surface or manifestation, that is, the level at which Wang Wei's poetry is expressed in 8th century Chinese. For an Italian reader, however, a good translation will be sufficient to cross this first linguistic barrier[8], although never without a loss of nuances of meaning, given the complexity of the poetic translation between languages and cultures that are so distant (Eco, 2003, *Dire*;

7. "太乙近天都／連山接海隅／白雲迴望合／青靄入看無／分野中峰變／陰晴眾壑殊／欲投人處宿／隔水問樵夫"; Engl. trans. Edward C. Chang.

8. For instance, through the collection *Poesie del fiume Wang*, translated by the Italian sinologist Martin Benedikter (1980).

2003, *Mouse*). At deeper levels of the textual organization, however, crossing the frontier between unfamiliarity and acquaintance would be more difficult. At the deepest level of texts, for instance, a long acquaintance with Chinese culture and history would be necessary in order to grasp the set of fundamental spiritual values that under-pins traditional Chinese poetry and to "translate" it for the western and Italian understanding of it. This operation would be easier for the contemporary Chinese reader but it would not be completely smooth either: a gap of centuries of history separates a classic Chinese poet from his present–day compatriot readers. In both cases, only study, a refined sensibility, and assiduous familiarizing with history and literature, plus a certain personal hermeneutic talent, will bridge the spatial, temporal, and cultural gap, transforming a poem into a controlled experience of otherness, that is, otherness that strikes receivers of the poem enough to alter their perception of reality but not so much as to become unintelligible and, as a consequence, ineffectual.

Experiencing otherness through traditional media and formats like books and literature is sometimes revolutionizing but it is also somehow facilitated by the adoption of textual forms that, despite local peculiarities and varieties, usually are a global phenomenon. Contemporary Italian readers coming across a poem by Li Shang-yin[9] might be totally unfamiliar with the themes of his texts, yet these readers will recognize their expression as poetry, for they will identify, in them, some formal features (the articulation of discourse into verses, for instance) that are actually more spread out and global than the contents that they express; see, for instance, the classical poem *The Cicada* [蟬]: the western reader will recognize it immediately as a poem but, although helped by the translation, will not understand the cultural reference to the cicada, which is traditionally used as an animal metaphor of incautious squandering in the west, whereas in China it is the clean animal per excellence, as it supposedly feeds only on dew and wind.

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9. In Chinese: 李商隐; courtesy name: Yishan (義山); c. 813–c. 858.

To begin with, being clean
does not free you from hunger.
Why then keep
uttering bitterness?
By the fifth hour,
your voice becomes weak and husky.
But the green tree remains
indifferent and unmoved.
As a low–ranking official,
I am but a drifting twig.
The fields at home
are wasted with overgrown weeds.
Thank you for
alerting me, my friend.
My family and I too are
just like you: pure and clean[10].

The evolution of many of these textual forms, indeed, probably went through a process of cultural transmission or, in certain cases, autonomous polygenesis that bridges linguistic, national, and even cultural frontiers. 17th century British literature met the favor of a global audience, but an even wider spatial and temporal area adopted the textual form of the sonnet, which became, as a consequence, a discursive artifact able to manifest a large variety of cultural sensibilities and themes (Kemp, 2013).

2.2. *Extraneousness*

As otherness is experienced not through the lenses of these global textual forms but in everyday life, grasping its relevance and contents becomes much more difficult, for, in this case, pertinence and meaning escape any formal framework and offer themselves, instead, as

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10. "本以高難飽／徒勞恨費聲／五更疏欲斷／一樹碧無情／薄宦梗猶汎／故園蕪已平／煩君最相警／我亦舉家清"; English trans. Edward C. Chang.

pure extraneousness. The difference between otherness and extraneousness resides precisely in that: otherness can be "appropriated" — and its essential charge of subversion with it — through translational operations that are already codified into culture and actually facilitated by the global circulation and, therefore, familiarity of textual forms. In extraneousness, instead, that which emerges is not the differential potential of otherness but the disquietude of what cannot be tamed and made familiar, for no conventional operations of translations subsist so as to turn the uncanny into the intelligible.

The experience of otherness might be shocking but it usually is, albeit sometimes painfully, enriching. The experience of extraneousness, on the contrary, is that of a semiotic suffering that is never rewarded, of an anxiety that never leads one from meaninglessness to meaningfulness, and never even promises the possibility of such a passage. The emotional result of the encounter with otherness is curiosity, followed by inquiry, and, in fortunate cases, cultural intercourse. The emotional result of extraneousness is, on the contrary, fear, if not panic. It generates and hands down an imaginary of monstrosity and unbridgeable distance. There is, however, a degree of unfamiliarity that is even deeper than that of extraneousness since this, at least, manages to trigger a feeling of shock and, therefore, an opportunity for self–interrogation, although that does not turn into self–awareness like in the encounter with otherness. Indeed, the highest degree of blind unfamiliarity does not even manifest itself but remains concealed in the dumbness of unawareness.

2.3. *From Otherness through Extraneousness to Unawareness: Chinese examples*

A. Calisthenics

A simple example will clarify the difference between otherness, extraneousness, and unawareness. An Italian present–day (early 21st century) observer walks through a contemporary Chinese park.

There are, of course, different kinds of Italian observers, with different degrees of familiarity with China and its culture, from the sinologist that takes a break from a congress to the ignorant tourist, as there are different kinds of parks, depending on the area of China in which they are situated, the epoch in which they were created, and the peculiar style of the designer. In this sort of example, however, it is not the specific nuances of singular observers and parks that are relevant but ideal types subsuming the most frequent of their characteristics. In this idea–typical situation, then, the Italian observer will experience some elements of the Chinese park as loaded with otherness. Walking early in the morning around the West Lake in Hangzhou, she or he will be struck, for instance, by the large variety of sport or meditation activities that Chinese people of all ages practice therein at such an early hour: from tai chi to calligraphy, from backward running to kung fu.

With regards to this first level of otherness, the semiotician and the lay observer will not be so different from each other, at least up to a certain stage. They will both pay attention to some unfamiliar behaviors in the environment, and they will both compare and contrast them with those that are normally seen in western parks, such as running or volleyball playing. Nevertheless, a fundamental difference will emerge between the profane and the professional observer at the moment of the analysis: lay observers will limit themselves to witnessing and taking mental note of the difference, often smiling at it (a common profane reaction to that which is not fully understood). Semioticians, on the contrary, will not be content with such surface (or, even, superficial) observation but, with a typical epistemological move, will seek to read these remarks as signs of something else, and specifically as expressions of a subjacent cultural grammar that, brought about by specific historic and social processes, produces, in turn, a whole variety of textual manifestations, including those of early morning activities in Chinese parks[11].

11. On the semiotics of parks and gardens, see Larsen, 1997; specifically on Chinese gardens, see Shiyuan Yu, 2017.

The semiotician will be tempted to establish a connection, then, between a certain style of physical exercise and the extent to which the community where it appears has come into contact with global modernity. Were the same semiotician to observe physical exercise as it presents itself in present–day Chinese university campuses, for instance, she or he would realize that it does not diverge as much from the usual calisthenics panorama of the west, since ways of training, sport clothes, and even movements and gestures have become more globalized for the recent generations of Chinese youths than for their immediate predecessors[12]. The evolution of culture and of the socio–economic structure that underpins it impacts not only on traditional textual artifacts but also on apparently more "natural" social elements such as faces, bodies, gestures, ways of moving in space through different activities, etc. Fashion does not concern only clothes but also visages, and not only the "explicit fashion" of hats, hairstyles, makeup, jewelry, etc., but also the "implicit fashion" that expresses itself as a consequence of the quality of food, the degree of exposure to external agents such as sunlight, the access to quality dentistry, etc.

B. Food

At a deeper lever of unfamiliarity, then, most people, and especially those who are not cognizant with the heuristics of anthropology, will experience an even more severe form of cultural unintelligibility than otherness, that is, extraneousness. The most common and even trivial way of feeling extraneousness is in the domain of food, where habits and comfort (and discomfort) zones crystallize as second nature at a very early stage of life, even earlier than in "natural" languages. One can, of course, learn to "tolerate" the food of others, or even reach the stage of appreciating it, yet some culinary experiences will not be only "different" but deeply extraneous and sensorially disturbing, since they will infringe some deep–seated

12. For a semiotic perspective on the globalization of sport in China, see Wei, 2014.

gastronomic taboos. In the touristy alleys of several Chinese cities, for instance in the area of the Confucius Temple (Fuzi Miao), in Nanjing, the present–day Italian observer will be offered enticing samples of a brownish film, cut into small lozenges. Chinese visitors will eagerly accept and consume these samples, often queuing in front of the various stalls in order to be offered them; to most Italian visitors, however, these fragments of that which reveals itself to be, upon the very first tasting, a kind of jerky made of some sort of sweetened pork meat [*bakkwa* (in Chinese: 肉乾), *rougan* (in Chinese: 肉干), or *roupu* (in Chinese: 肉脯)], will be not appealing at all and, in some circumstances, will prove revolting.

That of course has nothing to do with the food itself, but with the fact that its very existence — which is totally normal and even appreciated in China — violates one of the culinary taboos of Italian food, that is, the "illegitimacy" of preparing sweets with pork meat. Dishes of this sort were — and to a limited, mostly festive and regional extent, still are — present in Italy too (think about the famous "sanguinaccio", a mostly Neapolitan sweet delicacy consisting in a concoction of pork blood and chocolate); the majority of Italian contemporary eaters, however, will find these archaic preparations as extraneous as the analogous Chinese delicacies, whose charge of difference is further increased by spatial and cultural distance. In this case, the semiotician too will be struck by cultural difference, for she or he will not be able to rely on the same codified mechanisms of translation that are available for the "taming" of cultural otherness[13]. It is quite hard, indeed, to understand through what complex paths of material cultural history Chinese people came to like sweetened pork meat, whereas Italian people do not or do not anymore. In general, indeed, the more a socio–cultural habit is interiorized as second nature (and food habits are among the most embodied of

13. The semiotics of food is a fast expanding field with an increasingly abundant bibliography; Jean–Jacques Boutaud, Gianfranco Marrone, and Simona Stano are among the most prolific authors in this area. On the specific issue of food translation between east and west, see Stano, 2015 and 2016.

them, often enshrined into personal taste since childhood), the less easy it will be to "debunk" it through a meticulous dissection of its cultural genealogy.

Beyond otherness and extraneousness, cultural difference remains in the limbo of unawareness. Individuals exposed to alien patterns of meaning do not simply find them different or monstrous but they remain utterly unaware of them. These unperceived patterns, however, may continue to exert their semiotic agency at a subliminal level, without necessarily passing through the conscious and explicit articulation of the receiver. Italian readers of Can Xue's[14] novels, for instance, will appreciate the stories, the style, the lexical choices (even though only in the available translations) but they will completely miss a whole series of central socio–aesthetic messages that only deep familiarity with present–day Chinese culture and its codes can disclose. Reading and interpreting the Chinese novelist's *Love in the New Millennium* (2013) in–depth, then, will require the hermeneutic perspective to exist side by side with the anthropological one, detecting and decoding the hidden cultural presuppositions of the literary text.

C. Fences

Another example — taken, once again, from Chinese parks and everyday life — will clarify the difference between otherness, extraneousness, and unawareness even better. Walking around the West Lake in Hangzhou[15], Italian visitors will most probably be pervaded by a feeling of luminous serenity. They will ascribe the perception of this atmosphere to the elegant shape of the lake, to the delicacy of the vegetation bordering it, to the refinedness of the bridges and gazebos punctuating its shores, and even to the serenity of Chinese passersby. Most of these Italian visitors, however, will not realize

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14. Can Xue (in Chinese: 残雪), née Deng Xiaohua (in Chinese: 邓小华) in 1953 in Changsha, Hunan Province, China.

15. See An, 2009.

that a very important architectural element plays a key role in transmitting this sensation: no fence surrounds the lake. No physical and, as a consequence, optical obstacle is interposed between the body and the gaze of the visitor and the water of the lake. It might seem a banal detail but it is not so at all, as regards both its causes and its effects[16]. Concerning the latter, this absence of fences increases the visitor's bodily and visual proximity to water, even contributing to a feeling of fusion with the natural landscape; concerning the former, it is evident that a whole socio–aesthetic culture results in this architectural detail. Upon eventually realizing the absence of fences at the lake, indeed, most Italian visitors would worry: «What about children distractedly falling into water?». Asking this question means already passing from the level of unawareness to that of extraneousness. But the following passage, from extraneousness to otherness, calls for the intervention of a semiotician and for the formulation of some explicative hypotheses. The absence of fences around the Chinese lake could be motivated by a different conception of the public space as a dimension not of risk and danger but of tranquility and assurance, in which children are not threatened by the environment but actually "adopted" by an entire community.

This different conception of the public space, which results in either the presence or the absence of fences around a park lake, can be experienced also diachronically: up to a certain stage of Italian 20th century history, in small cities like the present author's hometown, Lecce, it was absolutely normal not to lock the gate or main door of one's house, since the public space outside would be perceived as one of safety; instead, the absence of locks would be unthinkable today, now that the public space is represented and perceived as full of possible threats.

The Italian visitor to the park is mostly unaware of this impact of a certain culture of safety on the public architecture of Hangzhou West Lake; the Chinese visitor, however, will be even more unaware of it; she or he could maybe start realizing the relation between per-

16. On the semiotics of fences in parks, see Kaczmarczyk, Salvoni, 2016.

ception of threats in the public space and public architecture only upon visiting a park lake in Italy, and only after noticing that it is obsessively surrounded by fences. Indeed, in order to realize what cultural features of our own semiosphere we are unaware of we must actually come across some alternatives to them in other semiospheres, so that our extraneousness to the latter might actually reveal our unconscious familiarity with the former.

D. Fountains

Some cultural features, then, might be so profoundly engrained in the deep–seated meshes of a semiosphere as to escape even the most abstract sociological observations. If, on the one hand, reference to a certain social perception of the safety of the public space might justify the presence or absence of some architectural details in a park or in a city, there is no easy sociological explanation for the fact that, for instance, fountains are much rarer in the Chinese parks than in the Italian ones. One might explain this difference by simply ascribing it to a "matter of taste"; this explanation, however, would be highly unsatisfactory and, ultimately, tautological. What is it, indeed, that determines such a discrepancy of taste in the relation between two or more cultures?

As it was suggested earlier, in this case, a simply sociological survey or even assiduous ethnological observation might not suffice anymore. On the one hand, no explicit sources of information would be available to inquire about the rationale of this cultural difference; architects would mostly be unable to explain why they have placed a fountain in a park, or why they have not; similarly, visitors would be mostly incapable of accounting for the reason for which they find either the absence or presence of fountains in a park "normal" or "strange". In reality, such opposition would not reveal its inner meaning to anthropologists either, for, in order to become significant, it should first be analyzed structurally, in keeping with the customary mindset of structural anthropology and semiotics.

The presence or absence of fountains in parks, then, would be read more abstractly, as the architectural embodiment of a subjacent opposition between, on the one hand, a movement of water from the bottom up (fountains) and, on the other hand, a movement of water from the top down (which is typical of those waterfalls, cascades, and flowing rivers that are omnipresent, instead, in Chinese parks).

Given this structural and plastic analysis of the opposition between fountains and cascades, then, cultural semiotics could propose some interpretative hypotheses about it; it might be surmised, for instance, that fountain civilizations are those in which an idea of the aesthetic agency as competing with nature and even contrasting it prevails over an alternative aesthetics of gently yielding to its "natural" flowing. In a western park, then, a local visitor would be impressed by the engineering force through which water has been actually "obliged" to reverse the natural course of its flowing, whereas in a Chinese park, the local visitor would enjoy the delicacy by which the architect has seconded and accompanied the "natural" direction of the elements, of plants, and even of minerals, showing the human presence in a very subtle, discreet way. Visitors exploring a foreign park, then, would perceive otherness or even extraneousness, but they would be mostly unaware of the deep cultural reasons that underpin such reactions; they could even appreciate "the park of the other" — for instance, being attracted as western visitors by the gentleness of the Chinese parks, or being impressed, as Chinese visitors, by the energy of western parks —[17]; yet, this movement of attraction, or the equally possible movement of rejection, would be experienced as spontaneous and, mostly, unmotivated.

17. On the 18th century attraction of the Chinese élite to European parks, gardens, and fountains, see in particular Chayet, 1987 (on the gardens of Old Summer Palace, known in Chinese as Yuanming Yuan [圆明园], in which, starting from 1747, the emperor Qianlong [乾隆帝] had the Jesuit architect Giuseppe Castiglione design the fountains of the "western" palaces).

Conclusions: The Benefits of Intercultural Awareness

The analysis carried out by cultural semiotics transforms the unaware perception of aesthetic differences into an articulated awareness of the underlying patterns of meaning. Such a passage from unawareness to awareness is beneficial both for those who already appreciate otherness, in order for them to better understand and enjoy the reasons for such appreciation, and for those who actually reject it, since a deeper comprehension of extraneousness contributes to turning it into simple otherness. Comprehending that Chinese parks have fewer fountains because they are in line with a different aesthetic conception of the relation between nature and craft will not turn a detractor of this park aesthetics into an appreciator, but will encourage reinterpretation of cultural difference in a frame that is immune to hostility. Deciphering the deep meaning patterns of cultural otherness perhaps does not necessarily lead one to love it and embrace it but at least it prevents one from hating it and antagonizing it.

3. The Present Collection

All the articles in the present collection revolve around the contemporary Chinese aesthetics as it emerges from literature, the arts, and also from the discourse and texts of popular culture. They focus on various media, genres, and styles, but they all share the same thematic slant and methodological perspective. As regards the former, they all bear on the passage of semantic contents and aesthetic sensibility from the east to the west (and vice versa) offering a detailed analysis of as many case studies of cross–cultural fertilization between China and Europe. As regards the method, all the articles offer in–depth textual analyses that are meant to give rise to a structured comparison between different matrixes of cultural production, considering, therefore, texts as signs of more encompassing semiotic configura-

tions (which Lotman's semiotics calls "semiospheres"). Through the adoption of a rich array of semiotic analytical tools, the chapters promote the reader's awareness of contemporary China's cultural specificities in relation to the west, so as to accomplish that passage from extraneousness to comprehension that has been theoretically described above and promoted as socially beneficial.

The first section of the collection, *Chinese Aesthetics from the Inside*, contains articles written by Chinese scholars on Chinese texts, ranging from literature to cinema, from TV series to rap music, and focusing on the transformation and evolution of the Chinese aesthetics in its current crucible, where global trends of cultural production mix with local forms of aesthetic elaboration. All the chapters in this first series look at present–day China through a gaze that connects it with the vast field of popular culture global trends in the beginning of the 21st century.

The article by Zeng Jun, *A Cultural Analysis of Temporal Signs in Twenty–First Century Chinese Literature*, consists in an original reading of the conceptions and symbols of time as they are found in present–day Chinese novels, with specific attention to *Blossoms* [繁花] (2012) by Jin Yucheng[18], *Tiny Times* (4 tomes, 2012–3) [小时代] by Guo Jingming[19], and *The Three–Body Problem* (2008) [三体] by Liu Cixin[20]. Through a semiotically inspired close reading, the article develops a typology of temporal discourses in the current Chinese culture, whose patterns of semantic chronology can be considered as emerging from the most recent evolution of the Chinese semiosphere.

Zhou Haitian's article *Mimetic Desire or Productive Work?: The Semiotic Analysis of Two Science Fictions in 21st century China* is yet another exploration of the present–day Chinese aesthetics as it finds expression in popular culture, with particular reference to the genre of science fiction and to the two famous works *Folding Beijing* [北京

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18. In Chinese: 金宇澄; born in Shanghai on December 18, 1952.
19. In Chinese: 郭敬明; born in Shanghai on June 6, 1985.
20. In Chinese: 刘慈欣; born in Yangquan, Shanxi, China, on June 23, 1963.

折叠] (2012) by Hao Jingfang[21] and the already mentioned *The Three–Body Problem*. Through a close reading of these novels, the chapter develops an original perspective on the contemporary Chinese understanding of the relation between imitation and invention, realistic and fictional production of literary meaning.

The article by Zhao Kuiying, *Art as a Presencing Sign: A New Exploration of Art Semiotics*, seeks to provide a theoretical framework for the understanding and analysis of the arts in contemporary China with reference to Charles S. Peirce's philosophy of the sign and with particular stress on the idea of "presentification", that is, the capacity of the aesthetic discourse for resulting not only in the re–presentation of a content but also in its presence through the construction of an aesthetic aura that responds to the ontological thirst of the spectator.

The article by Lu Zhenglan and Zhao Yiheng revolves around the main aesthetic trends of the Chinese present–day semiosphere, with specific attention to the relation between mass production of meaning and construction of aesthetic value; the processes and paradoxes of pan–aesthetization are read in relation to both the artistic coating of everyday life and the quotidian reception of contemporary arts, offering an essential survey of the development of artistic and popular culture in current China.

Peng Jia's article *On the Semiotic Model of Objecthood Proposed in Dragon–Carving and the Literary Mind* adopts a semiotic framework so as to explore an original thesis of cross–cultural aesthetics, bearing on the relevance of objects as mediators of both artistic and, more generally, cultural sensibility. This approach is crucial both for pinpointing one of the most important elements in the development of Chinese aesthetics, that is, the attention to the symbolical radiance of artifacts, and to contrast this long–term cultural attitude with those that are traditional to the west.

Duan Lian's article *The Problem of Symbolization of the Painting Image* seeks to achieve a detailed understanding of the typical patterns

21. In Chinese: 郝景芳; born in Tinajin, China, on July 27, 1984.

of artistic symbolization in Chinese abstract art within the methodological framework offered by the semiotics of the fine arts and its attempts at facing the challenge of interpreting non–figurative painting; such a challenge is faced in its cross–cultural version, with attention to the possibility of comparing and contrasting plastic visual productions across aesthetic semiospheres.

The article by Han Lei, *A Historical and Semiotic Analysis of* Cina*'s Calling on China in the Cultural Revolution*, deals with one of the most interesting cases of cultural contact between China and the west in the history of cinema, offering both a historical reconstruction and a semiotic analysis of *Cina* — also known in Chinese as *Chung Kuo* —, the ambitious documentary planned and directed by Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni so as to offer the European audience a vision of the state of China in the beginning of the 1970s.

Gao Yan's article *Empty Mirror as Metaphor: In The Case of* "Nothing in the Mirror" highlights a cultural trend in the aesthetics of present–day popular culture through the philosophical study of a recent successful TV series, *Nothing in the Mirror* [空镜子], whose close reading reveals the ability to play with some of the traditional contents of Chinese culture and to transform them into key elements of the TV narrative and its new messages to the contemporary Chinese society.

The article by Wang Jia–Jun, The Rap of China *and Hip–Hop's Cultural Politics* considers in the light of cultural comparison and semiotic reading one of the most successful formats of present–day global TV, that is, the "talent show", investigating its particular transformation in the specific socio–cultural panorama of present–day China, and detecting the disempowering effect that the global aesthetics of entertainment exerts over a genre, the Chinese rap, traditionally endowed with critical potentiality.

The second section of the book, *Chinese Aesthetics from the Outside*, focuses on the cross–fertilization between Chinese artistic tradition and western aesthetics, with particular attention to case studies and episodes of cultural exchange and re–writing between the east and

the west. Concentrating on painting (Massimo Leone) music (Gabriele Marino), food (Simona Stano), cinema (Bruno Surace), and videogames (Mattia Thibault), this second section composes a map of subtle cultural influences bridging as well as problematizing the aesthetic confrontation of the European and the Chinese aesthetic sensibilities.

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