

**Hubert, Rosario. 2023. *Disoriented Disciplines: China, Latin America, and the Shape of World Literature*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.**

**Martina Altalef**

Centre for Comparative Studies

University of Lisbon, Portugal

[martina.altalef@edu.ulisboa.pt](mailto:martina.altalef@edu.ulisboa.pt)

ORCID: 0009-0004-5029-0904

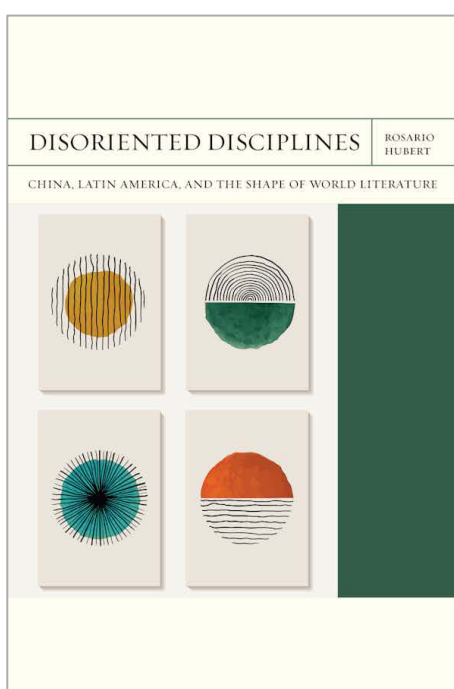
**Telma Carvalho**

Centre for Comparative Studies

University of Lisbon, Portugal

[telma.carvalho@edu.ulisboa.pt](mailto:telma.carvalho@edu.ulisboa.pt)

ORCID: 0000-0003-3621-138X



*DISORIENTED DISCIPLINES: China, Latin America, and the Shape of World Literature* (2023), by Rosario Hubert, explores the transnational, diasporic and global dimensions of cultural manifestations of China in Latin America, undertaking a demanding task: by embracing the undisciplined essence of Comparative Literature, instead of containing it, the author analyses not only canonical literary works, but also genres that are normally considered complementary or paratextual, such as travel narratives, book reviews, and memoirs, as well as non-textual objects and other cultural practices. These artifacts, Hubert argues, constitute the vital spaces of critical intervention when examining the discourse about China in Latin America, especially due to the absence of a specialized epistemological framework for oriental studies in the region. *Disoriented Disciplines* demonstrates how, in Latin America, sinology has been developed by writers, editors, translators, artists, intellectuals and diplomats – not by scholars – amidst trade routes, commercial navigation, human trafficking and global circuits of cultural diplomacy and political militancy. This book, however, not only provides an in-depth investigation of the representation, mediation and circulation of Chinese culture in Latin America, but also proposes a distinctive methodology that deeply concerns those dedicated to World Literature and Comparative Studies, suggesting new modes of reading, and new perspectives to map the world.

Rosario Hubert is currently Associate Professor at Trinity College (Connecticut, USA), where, since 2014, she teaches and conducts academic research in the areas of Spanish and Portuguese Languages, World Literature and Translation. Native speaker of Spanish and fluent in an array of languages, Hubert specializes in the cultural intersections of China and Latin America. *Disoriented Disciplines* was conceived as a long-term project that involved personal passions, academic interests and professional requirements, and earned the support of several scholarly institutions: Harvard University, Trinity College, the Northwestern University Press, the American Comparative Literature Association, the National Library of Argentina – a network that reflects the complexity of academic work in the international spheres of contemporary Comparative Studies.

Hubert's book intertwines enriching reflections by an international set of scholars who work in the USA and a selection of the most relevant works by the Argentinian literary critics of the past decades – from Ricardo Piglia and Sylvia Molloy to Graciela Montaldo and Gonzalo Aguilar. The fecund theoretical framework of this research includes approaches to World Literature by David Damrosch, Emily Apter and Franco Moretti; the theory of Orientalism, by Edward Said; and questionings about the Western gaze within the Humanities by Zhang Longxi. Additionally, concepts such as 'infrastructures', developed by anthropologist Brian Larking to better understand the materialities through which people, objects and ideas move across the globe; the idea of 'anarchaeologies', suggested by Erin Graff-Zivin to rethink the possibilities of literary criticism and academic interdisciplinarity; or Beatriz Sarlo's notion of 'orillas' [margins] to define peripheral cultural positions, are productively recuperated and put into dialogue. Although the perspectives of Chinese theorists and critics are not incorporated in the main theoretical framework of the book,

several mentions are made to critical pieces when needed, such as the notion of ‘utopian ruins’ and the proposal of a memorial museum of varied artifacts by Jie Li.

In tune with the project’s aim of proving that the Latin American writings of China cross the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge and methods, combining literary studies, philology, linguistics, translation studies, ethnography, history, international relations, and more, Hubert forms an open-ended, expansive *corpus*. When studying works by – among others – Rubén Darío, Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, Haroldo de Campos, and Severo Sarduy, the author reads the unexpected and unexplored within the modern canon: China, its diplomacy, its representations and depictions, the imbrications of its politics, aesthetics and critical thinking. The *corpus* also includes a series of unorthodox materialities that imbricate textual and non-textual objects. Thus, *Disoriented Disciplines* creates and studies an articulation of *a priori* dissimilar elements, connects diverse historical moments, refers to different manifestations of the Chinese culture, and observes multiple periods in Latin American cultural history – from Spanish American *modernismo* to Brazilian *concretismo* to Third World socialist realism and beyond. Hubert presents the existing writings of China in Latin America and sews, by means of a chronological organization, a thematically, ideologically and formally non-homogeneous *corpus*.

After a strong introduction in which Hubert states that Latin American comparative criticism is fundamentally about indiscipline and translatability, underlining the historical lack of specialized frameworks for sinology in the region, the book presents five main chapters, sequenced chronologically from the nineteenth century to the present. Each chapter concentrates on one specific form of expression related to China in Latin America: the “coolie” trade documents and the *crónicas modernistas* [modernist short stories] concerning Chinese migration and *chinoiseries*; Borges’ writings on China and his fictional sinology; the trajectories and initiatives of several cultural agents; the artists and poets inspired by the imagery of the Chinese script, especially as presented in classical poetry; and the materialization of the Cultural Revolution aftermath in recent films, memoirs and novels.

The title of the first chapter, “Trade, Tourism and Traffic – The Labor Routes of *Modernismo*”, reveals the literary and cultural criss-cross Hubert seeks. Building upon the influence that *chinoiserie* had on the *crónicas modernistas*, the author delves into specific texts that relate to the movements of Chinese immigrants and the human traffic routes between China and the Americas, namely *crónicas* by José Martí, Enrique Gómez Carrillo, and José Juan Tablada. Shedding light on the dispersed depictions of the labourers that were transported across the seas from China to Peru, Cuba and México, a series that the author names as “coolie passage archive” (54), translation is seen as an act of moving bodies. Through the analysis, the willingness to debate issues concerning labour migrations in South America also becomes evident in the *modernistas’* prose, even though the debate was not taken as a political stance, but as a literary one.

Chapter 2, “Sinology on the Edge”, historicizes sinology and examines the fictional epistemology of China created within Jorge Luis Borges’ narratives that portray Chinese characters, the figures of Western sinologists and travellers, and (apocryphal) Chinese textual objects. It is argued that these are not representations of China, its culture or its people, but rather humanistic reflections on China as an

object of fascination and study. According to Hubert, Borges states, through fiction, that the Western conception of China is an artifice, a philological product, a forever mistaken attempt to contain and translate a forever distant culture. Sinology is thus put “on the edge” (67), while discussing the very nature of (Western) Humanities, the global circulation of cultural products, literary translation, and World Literature. By the end of the chapter, the author lists Borges’ readings of Chinese literature and critically comments on the writer’s hermeneutical positions. Translation is here examined as a form of creative writing.

Chapter 3, entitled “The Twisted Networks of Cultural Diplomacy – Global Maoism in Print”, takes the reader further into the middle of the twentieth century, shifting to the trajectories of cultural agents that “gravitated between the networks of Maoist diplomacy and the booming Spanish book industry in Latin America” (21). Seemingly a vague type of object to focus on, it actually shows the importance that serendipitous moments or figures can have in the cultural field. Episodes, such as the two-hour unexpected meeting between poet Ai Qing and several Argentinian writers during an aircraft repair in Buenos Aires in 1954, give way to three case studies of intellectual projects in Argentina that took advantage from the PRC agenda to disseminate Chinese culture and Maoist diplomacy in order to put forward their own cultural initiatives.

The visual aspect is the common thread of the artifacts studied in chapter 4, “The Surface of the Ideograph – Visual Poetry and the Chinese Script”. In this section, Hubert takes into consideration how the Chinese classic poem served as a catalyst due to its visual value, rather than its literary content. Putting to good use her Chinese language skills, the author looks at the artistic works of José Juan Tablada, Haroldo de Campos and Severo Sarduy to unveil how the Chinese script influenced and inspired Spanish and Portuguese publications in Latin America. Here, translation echoes a complex act of transcreation and mediation and defies even further the notion of translation beyond the linguistic.

Finally, chapter 5, “Moving Memories – The Affective Archive of the Cultural Revolution”, concentrates on the archival memory, its subjective, affective and intimate dimensions, and studies documentaries, memoirs and novels produced by the sons and daughters of Latin American militants and intellectuals who lived in China during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Raised in China, the children of those prominent Maoists were both educated as locals and treated as foreigners. The narratives of this second generation are read as post-memories that illuminate childhood and youth perspectives, underline the bodily inscriptions of the Revolution, problematize the figures of political exiles, and open discussions on possible contemporary relations between politics and the arts. Translation here is conceived as an act of affective, sensorial and mnemonic transference.

Without a confining conclusion, the book ends with an afterword entitled “Imposture”, where Hubert reiterates the peculiarity of this archive and links the main analysis to a brief yet compelling reflection on contemporary Latin American writings on China. This section acknowledges those artifacts that did not find a way into the structure of the book, with special mention to *Los Impostores* (2002) by Santiago Gamboa, a novel that contains many of the intersections found in this study. Portraying itself as the scholarly reverse of Gamboa’s book, Hubert’s work enriches the

vast *disoriented, undisciplined* Latin American tradition of productively blending essay and fiction, literature and criticism. Additionally, fifteen images in black and white illustrate, throughout the book, several aspects of the proposal, highlighting the materiality of the cultural objects privileged by this study. In the Appendix, the table “Spanish translations of Chinese literary works published in Buenos Aires, 1942–81” (245–50) maps the vast – and yet very little read – number of literary works specifically translated and edited in one of the main editorial backgrounds in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking world. Finally, the detailed Index, gathering a wide variety of worldly terms, from acupuncture and Aztecs to *Weltliteratur* and Zhuangzi, attests to the expansiveness of this academic undertaking.

One of the strong points of the book is certainly its methodological and conceptual proposal. Hubert deliberately explores and reads together spaces of expression that normally do not get to be part of a grander scheme of representation. *Disoriented Disciplines* is a fresh outlook among Comparative Studies that successfully blends together not only unexpected objects of study, but also several areas of knowledge and geographies. In parallel, embracing the definitions of “disorientation” and “indiscipline” as positive features in the academic research *praxis*, encouraging its inherent instability and dispersion for a productive analysis, the book proposes an innovative perspective that gives coherence to the whole project. This is also a deliberate attempt to call out the meanings and purposes of the Humanities, as Hubert herself explains: “I seek to stress the speculative nature of the humanities, overlooked in an academic context that steadily forces humanistic disciplines to adapt to the protocols of science” (22).

A few critical observations throughout the book become noteworthy regarding the decentralization of the Humanities, and particularly the predominance of perspectives from the Global North within Comparative Studies. The author defends a revisitation of dominant standpoints, such as the general use of Orientalism to conceptualize the vast and diverse cultural products of the Global South. Subtly, the use of ‘American’ as a demonym that refers to one specific country, and not a complex multi-regional amalgamation, is contested, since *Disoriented Disciplines* insists on specifying ‘US American’ when referring to what comes from the United States. Furthermore, Hubert’s examination projects a plural mapping of the world, not only by focusing on unexplored relations between China and Latin America, but also by avoiding a Eurocentric analysis, and by including a Transpacific Studies approach. She explicitly claims that nations and regions are deeply unstable geographical constructs.

The stance on the broadness of translation is another positive note throughout this reading. The author’s background in Translation Studies and her knowledge of the Chinese language seem to enrich her conceptions of translation as a cultural practice grounded in several forms of displacement. For Hubert, translation is more than a textual operation: it “involves an act of displacement of the human, visual and haptic qualities of a literary artifact when it crosses cultural boundaries” (196). Moreover, translation here becomes the name for several phenomena: an exercise of creative writing and comparative reading, an act of media transfer, the displacement of humans through different modes of migration, the transplantation of sinology, the artistic appropriation of ideograms, the political emulations of Maoism, and the

affective transference of experiences of the exiled. This search for expansiveness is an “easier said than done” task that the author eventually develops chapter by chapter. The vast and precise knowledge of the author about both Latin America and China, concerning not only the official languages and cultures of each region, but also their histories and material traditions, paired with an extensive gathering of investigative results, contributes to the value of this work.

In addition to her specific, innovative and enriching analysis, Hubert includes a few noticeable reflections on conducting research and writing, particularly within World Literature, as well as self-referential comments on the material conditions of working in the academic spheres of Comparative Studies, and the intertwined actions and responsibilities of those who study, read, teach, and write. Becoming a mother and procrastinating are named as experiences that affect the bodily and intellectual practices of a contemporary woman scholar. These brief reflections on academic work and maternity, and the plasticity of the creative process related to writing and publishing are remarkable: included in the introduction and in the afterword, these notes serve as comments about the academic *praxis* as labour.

A challenging commitment as this one would be deemed to have its fragilities – although in this case we understand its shortcomings as inherent to the project’s conceptual and methodological ambition. The amount of information can be overwhelming in some sections of the book, particularly to those who are not familiar with Latin American literary history, and this can create a sense of ephemeral analysis on occasion. Also, the choice of *corpora* that is moderately read in close can seem ambivalent at times, although it is that very ambivalence that gives way to a heterogeneous and original selection. Finally, regarding editorial decisions that affect the reading process, it must be highlighted that big excerpts of most-needed, and very welcomed, translations are included in the main textual body, which sometimes results in an uncomfortable reading leap for those proficient in both Spanish/Portuguese and English.

By discussing the meaning of being a specialist in a foreign culture, *Disoriented Disciplines* is ultimately more about Latin America, its cultural and intellectual positions and manifestations, than about China or Chinese culture, and the book reveals practices of World Literature theoretical possibilities among spaces of critical intervention in Spanish and Portuguese. The originality of the topic studied by Hubert enables the exploration of alternatives to decentralize the Humanities, integrates the analysis of contemporary artifacts with reflections on Modernism and the historical formation of a worldly cultural *panorama*, and suggests innovative modes of *corpus* formation that overcome the binary conception of canonical/non-canonical, textual/non-textual, literary/non-literary works. In conclusion, the book is a recommended read, particularly for those concerned with the central questions that permeate the debates in Comparative Studies today, such as the inherent tensions of working on the edges of interdisciplinarity and the relationship between literature and other cultural practices.

**Martina Altalef** is a doctoral candidate in Comparative Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon, and has been granted a scholarship by Camões, I.P. (Portugal). Her dissertation topic is the aesthetical and political portrayal of human hair in contemporary literature and visual arts. Her disciplinary anchoring and interests involve Latin American and African Literature and Arts, Feminist Studies, Ethnic and Racial Studies, and Postcolonial Studies. She develops her research at the Centre for Comparative Studies (School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon) as a member of the cluster DIIA - Iberian and Ibero-American Dialogues, and coordinates the Nucleus of African Studies and African Literature (National University of General San Martín, Argentina). She is a member of the editorial boards of *Revista Transas* (Argentina) and *estrema* (Portugal) and works as a literary translator.

**Telma Carvalho** is a doctoral candidate in Comparative Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon, and holds a Master in Translation (2020) from the same institution. Her dissertation project, entitled “Intermittent Imaginaries: A Century of Chinese Science Fiction”, seeks to map the themes of the speculative genre throughout the history of twentieth-century China. At the Centre for Comparative Studies (CEComp, ULisboa), she is member of the research cluster MOV - *Moving Bodies: circulations, narratives and archives in translation*, and member of the editorial team of *estrema: interdisciplinary journal of humanities*. Prior to her postgraduate studies, she was a teacher and translator in China, where she lived for ten years. Her research interests broadly fall under the fields of Translation, Chinese Modern Literature and Speculative Fiction.

© 2024 Martina Altalef, Telma Carvalho

Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).