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Roland Barthes's *Travels in China*: Writing A Diary of Dissidence within Dissidence?

“Il faut être dialectique”¹

I doubt that the *Journal* has much interest,
if reading the work has not awakened some
initial curiosity as to the man.
(Roland Barthes writing on Gide in 1942²)

Throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s, Roland Barthes was looking for a dialectical way of writing. In three separate essays – one in 1960, ‘Authors and Writers’ that appeared in *Arguments*, another in 1965 on the dialectical writing of his colleague Edgar Morin in *Combat*, and a third in his magisterial piece of 1971 ‘Writers, Teachers, Intellectuals’ in *Tel Quel* – Barthes had come to the same conclusion. Despite the injunction for the responsible intellectual “‘we must be dialectical’”, language itself is incapable of being dialectical because, he argued, it is ‘monodic and linear’: it can speak of more than one phenomenon not at once but only in series.³ Even Marx, Barthes suggested, could not get beyond being (merely) a writer of paradoxes, his analysis being dialectical but not his writing.⁴ Given this, all the writer can do, Barthes concluded, is ‘dialectise themselves’ rather than ‘dialectising the world’.⁵

Nevertheless, writing a review in *Combat* in 1965 on the work and writing of Edgar Morin, Barthes seemed to glimpse a way out.⁶ Impressed by Morin’s use of an ‘open’ dialectic in his research, Barthes praised the ‘gongorism’ of his writing. Even though ‘a writer can declare the dialectic, but not represent it’ – the ‘monodic and linear’ structure of language meant that analysis was language’s domain, not synthesis or antagonism – Morin’s use of an open (that is, non-synthesised) dialectic could get round this problem. Barthes held a particular view on the way in which Morin’s work was able to do this, and we will not suggest at this stage that Barthes would set out to copy it.⁷ However, one aspect of Morin’s ‘being dialectical’ appeared, to Barthes, to be the ability to mobilise and then manipulate facts in such a way as to show their plurality.⁸ It is precisely this aspect of dialectical research that we will investigate in Barthes’s diary-writing during his trip to China in 1974.

Barthes’s visit to Maoist China in 1974, as part of a delegation led by his colleagues from the radical French journal *Tel Quel*, would seem then an obvious opportunity for him to try out his writing. Japan, during his trips there between 1966 and 1970, had acted as oriental(ist?) critique of Western decline in Barthes’s ‘happy’ account of his visit to Tokyo and elsewhere; Japan had also offered a Zen culture in which neither contradiction nor dialectic exists.⁹ Maoist China in 1974, by contrast, presented, albeit in a similar oriental distance as Japan from the ‘West’, a totally different set of inverse relations with Europe. Claude Coste has shown how the much-touted visit of the radical *Tel Quel* group – Maoist theorists in France since 1971 – would become a terrible agony for the Barthes in tow, but that he used his article in *Le Monde*, on his return in May 1974, to demarcate himself from the pro-China camp. Indeed, the very title of Barthes’s essay in *Le Monde* – ‘Well, and China?’ – used the voiced question from French polity to point to the self-irony of the intellectual being quizzed.¹⁰

As well as ‘Well, and China?’, we have two other sources of Barthes’s views on his trip. Firstly, Barthes gave an account of his visit to the postgraduate students in his seminar at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) in Paris in May 1974.¹¹ As part of the research for his experimental and humorous narrative of himself, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes was leading a project in this seminar during 1973 and 1974, called *Le Lexique de l’Auteur* [The Lexis of the Author], which took an author (himself, but in the third person); and, in front of his students,

whilst re-reading all his own work over thirty years of publishing, he tried out a startling experiment: what does it look like to look at oneself through the eyes of others, of society?¹² The visit to China was to become, therefore, an exemplary element in this experiment.

The other source – and published posthumously in 2009, at almost the same time as the 1973-1974 seminar *Le Lexique de l'Auteur* – is Barthes's notebooks, or 'writer's diaries' that he kept during the three-week visit to China.¹³ Barthes never gave permission to publish *Carnets du voyage en Chine* [*Travels in China*] and therefore this 'semi-text' – or 'avant-texte' (or fore-text) to give its critical-genetic name – is not really a 'text' in the same way as we might describe 'Well, and China?'. *Travels in China* does not have the author's *imprimatur* upon it; nor does it stand as part of a seminar paper destined for the ears (and no doubt, pens) of his select postgraduate students at the EPHE as is the case with the seminar notes we mentioned earlier.¹⁴ It is with these textual caveats in mind, coupled with the stipulation of dialectical research sketched out above, that we will consider Barthes's writing in these diaries written in China.

'Abyssal' Writing

There is one other possible influence on Barthes's writing in this early 1970s period. Although not Nietzschean – 'Je ne suis pas Nietzschéen', he declared in his seminar in 1974, 'simplement je lis Nietzsche' –, Barthes was clearly working with the German philosopher's aphoristic way of writing.¹⁵ Discussing with Raymond Bellour, in an interview in 1970, his aim to find a 'discontinuous discourse' against a 'dissertational discourse', Barthes welcomed, on the one hand, a Lévi-Strauss who was trying to get past the 'monodic' nature of the dissertation in favour of a 'polyphonic composition'; and, on the other, Lacan whose writing resisted 'secular censorship' in which the 'spark' or abrupt formulation was excised from writing.¹⁶ Indeed, continued Barthes, 'there has been no equivalent of Nietzsche in France', someone who 'dares to discourse from spark to spark, abyss to abyss'.¹⁷

Interestingly, it was precisely this word 'abyssale' that the renowned sceptical sinologist Simon Leys (the penname of the Belgian Pierre Rykmans) used to criticise Barthes's article in *Le Monde*, 'Well, and China?', accusing Barthes of embarrassed 'jesuitism'.¹⁸ But, as Coste hints, this was a 'solution' that Barthes adopted in the published article, in the face of friends and colleagues who were pro-China, especially the coterie at *Tel Quel*, mainly Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva, as well as the poet Marcelin Pleynet, who all travelled with him in April 1974. However, keen to show how Barthes felt constrained from different and contradictory directions to say the right thing about China, Coste does not underline that, between 1970 and 1974, Barthes made a number of asides that suggested a sympathy with *Tel Quel's* view in this period that China was somehow different, both from the West and totalitarian Soviet Union, and was, since the Cultural Revolution which had begun in 1966, more advanced even; and though not involved in the political cheerleading of a Antonietta Macciocchi in her 1971 book *De la Chine* (and who initiated the *Tel Quel* visit to China), Barthes was clearly curious about the claims made for the progressive nature of Maoism and the China which resulted from it.¹⁹ Indeed, what is touching in the *Travels in China* diary, according to one critic, is precisely the 'growing disillusionment of a group of friends' who were once 'ready to believe the true left has risen in the East'.²⁰

Though Kristeva and Sollers would both later claim that their revolutionary sinophilia between 1971 and 1976 had been, above all, a way of distancing themselves from the betrayals of the French Communist Party in the wake of May 68, it is difficult to ignore the obsessive way in which they led *Tel Quel*, through resignation after resignation from its editorial board, into its Maoist fervour, illustrated by the numerous *dazibaos* – Chinese revolutionary slogans as posters that Barthes describes in *Travels in China* – that apparently adorned the Paris office of *Tel Quel*.²¹

On the other hand, Barthes could not but be aware of the political critique at the time of China and Maoism. In Maurice Nadeau's *Quinzaine littéraire* for example, there were highly critical remarks in a review of Jean Pasqualini's *Prisonnier de Mao*.²² This, however, I wish to argue in this article, is to Barthes's credit. He went to China on a fact-finding mission, partly also out of solidarity

with Sollers and Kristeva. So, given the speed with which Barthes tired of Sollers's behaviour in Maoist mode and the subsequent dispute between Sollers and Wahl over China, not to mention the enthusiasm of Kristeva for the progressive nature of women's politics in China, the whole visit was a sensitive one.²³ It is this tension between a 'scientific' mission and a personal investment in an anti-Occidental project with *Tel Quel* that defines the diaries that Barthes subsequently kept during the three-week visit.

It is important to stress that Barthes was particularly sensitive at the time of his visit to China to issues of self-presentation in the diary. As part of the 'Lexique de l'auteur' project that he was leading in the EPHE seminar with his students in 1974, Barthes seemed acutely aware of the self, as it appeared in Gide's *Journal* and Proust's fictional account of how to start writing *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and also in the historicised ways in which Barthes himself had considered both of these texts at earlier stages of his own writing career (in 1942 and 1966 respectively).²⁴ Barthes might have held ambivalent views on the writer's diary, but he had certainly thought carefully about the self that emerges from them.²⁵ Indeed, the 1973-1974 seminar investigated not only 'life as text' – clearly a gesture towards the diary form – but also the 'doubled' figure of the writer, 'RB I' (the writer who has written) and 'RB II' (the writer who will write), what Barthes called the 'infinite duplicity' of a writer.²⁶ Though it should not be suggested that Barthes's diaries were simply his seminar in preparation, it is no coincidence that he 'performs' his visit to China in his seminar once back in Paris. Indeed – as Anne Herschberg Pierrot points out in a footnote at the start of the 'Sur la Chine populaire' seminar that Barthes gave on 8 May 1974 (that is, only four days after his return) – Barthes used the three *carnets* that make up his China travel-diary, as well as the fourth book which systematises these three *carnets*, to write an analysis for his students.²⁷

My aim in this article then is to consider the way in which Barthes's diaries in China figure the tension between political project and the social expectations of the writing self; in short, we will consider the 'abyssal' way in which it is written. Jean Birnbaum maintains that much of Barthes's writing in the diaries revolves around the 'war' between, on the one hand, language as 'bouffée' – a positive form of free human-speech acts – and, on the other, language as 'brique' [an ideologically-fixed 'lump' of stereotyped language].²⁸ We will see how the 'abyss' is not just a way to address this 'war', but also to add another determinant (including, but going beyond, the societal and personal need to respond to friends' and colleagues' demands for a 'response' to China) that of the dialectic as a search for facts, subjectively interpreted, but not (purely) impressionistic nor superficial.

Birnbaum argues that the *Travels in China* diaries and the *Journal de deuil* of three years later have one thing in common: they show that writing can emerge from the stereotype, the 'briques' in China and 'le pathétique' following his mother's demise. Birnbaum's view is important because these two very different diaries of Barthes's seem to consider that both phenomena – a propaganda trip to China and deep sorrow at his maternal loss – stymie writing. Unlike his experience of Japan, the experience of China seems to offer him no writerly opportunities:

All these notes will probably attest to the failure, in this country, of my writing (in comparison with Japan). In fact, I can't find anything to note down, to enumerate, to classify. (TiC 57).

Yet Barthes transforms this 'failure' into writing, for *Le Monde* (and for his seminar), just as his mourning at his mother's demise will lead to his treatise on Photography, *Camera Lucida*! But also it would seem that both diaries have scientific pretensions, what Marielle Macé calls 'une écriture à même la vie' [a form of writing at the level of living].²⁹ What Macé sees as 'elliptical' and 'minimal' in Barthes's diaries is part of the 'grand art' of the 'notation' that is written without any 'surplomb' (overhang or revision – this 'overhang' will come into play in the published pieces 'Well, and China?' and *Camera Lucida* respectively); for Macé, the *Travels in China* diaries show a Barthes as a good 'school boy' taking notes, but often concentrating, in his notations, on (seemingly irrelevant) incongruities found in his surroundings – a shirt that is too long, for example (a detail that clearly

prefigures Barthes's sensitivity to the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida*) – as part of a resistance to the 'chape idéologique' of the organised, State-sponsored visit. It is this dialectical mix of the objective search for the realities of Maoist China and the subjective experience of being there in its daily reality that will guide our analysis of Barthes's writing in the diaries.

'No Comment'?

In *Travels in China* we see Barthes not simply tiring of Sollers's hyper-enthusiasm for Maoist China, but also offering patient and searching questions about the true nature of China in 1974. Listening to the official accounts of the USSR's undermining of China's development following the Sino-Russian split of 1960 and the subsequent ideology launched by Mao of 'Independence and Autonomy', Barthes's critique of Stalinism – also experienced in Romania in the late 1940s during the Communist takeover – is in evidence, if only in an 'aside' in his diaries (signalled by the square brackets that are interjected between his note-taking):

[More and more this strikes me as obvious: searchlight on the national problem (counting on one's own strength), total opacity on the social-revolutionary – which means that, at the present stage of the journey, nothing really sets China apart from a Stalinist state.] (TiC 60)³⁰

In what we might call an example of 'dissidence within dissidence' – Maoism is highly 'dissident' in early 1970s France – Barthes is not reticent about seeing Maoist China in this period as 'Stalinist', a claim that is refuted by Sollers in the special number of *Tel Quel* on China.³¹ Gradually, in his diaries, we see Barthes beginning to be suspicious of the claims made in the interminable speeches of welcome and historical explanation, if only because of the gaps in the information given. In another interesting aside – again signalled by the square brackets – Barthes breaks off from the description of 'very fine' calligraphy to suggest how China might be perceived:

[Three levels of perception:

- 1) Phenomenology: what I see. Western manner
- 2) Structural: how it works: description of the operational apparatus. Stalinist level.
- 3) Politics: socio-revolutionary struggles. For which Revolution. Struggles between lines, etc.] (TiC 62-3)

The rub for Barthes, as the diaries go on, is that the French visitors in the *Tel Quel* delegation are not being shown anything but generalities – delivered in the regular 'bricks' of official state ideology – generalities that do nothing but hide the true social realities of China. At the end of a long list of figures and information on China's promethean expansion built on self-reliance – '[vague and banal [...], a bit like a child's game, very Fourierist]' – Barthes delivers his critical judgment: '[Never anything on the way wages work, the properly social, owners]' (TiC 88).

As well as ironically voicing the 'bricks' of ideology that the guides and officials welcoming the *Tel Quel* group regularly use, Barthes's diaries in China also use a more dramatic technique to chip away at the dis- and mis-information that is being meted out. On a number of occasions in the diaries Barthes describes how Sollers and others try to get the main guide, Zhao, to hand over the translators' list of the various 'bricks' of ideology that they needed in order to help with French communication. This 'absolute semiotic document' as Barthes calls it (TiC 75), is, according to Marcelin Pleyne's diary of the visit (cited in TiC 205 n.1), never forthcoming, as Zhao refuses to hand this list over to the *Tel Quel* group; nevertheless, Barthes is keen to systematize these 'bricks': '[Make a list of the X stereotypes (bricks) that I have gathered]' (TiC 98), he muses soon after the incident of not handing over the list. It would seem that from this point on in the diaries Barthes begins, slowly but inexorably, to lose heart in finding out about the 'real' China. Remembering the

State verdict on Michelangelo Antonioni's disparaging documentary on China, *Chung Kuo China* (1972), as '[... "Contemptible method and treacherous intent"]', Barthes writes in his diary that presented with a visit to the Ming tomb, he has lost interest: 'I stay in the car while the others get out, take photos. Can't be bothered' (TiC 79). A bit later, Barthes begins to tire of the endless and unending addresses: '[The longwinded speeches continue. School, Family, Society, etc. but my thoughts drift.]' (TiC 85).

It is here perhaps that the real tension in Barthes's diary emerges. Keen to find out about contemporary China – as the lengthy and dutiful notes taken in the diary attest – but mindful, at the same time, of the ideological control that the presentation of Chinese society under Mao entails, Barthes is also sensitive to the need to present accurately, ethnographically, the Chinese people. It is here that the 'abyssal' way of writing the diary that Barthes adopted – be it directly Nietzschean, 'from spark to spark' as he put it, or 'dialectical' in the way that Morin's writing was able to show a 'plurality' of meanings – was at its most intense, if not its most fruitful.

Barthes's fascination with the 'minute' detail of Japanese culture in his 1970 essay *Empire of Signs* is now redirected to the vastly different situation of Maoist China. Indeed, following a throwaway line (from Zhao, presumably, who has just been described as hoping to see to every wish of the *Tel Quel* visitors, be it peonies in the hotel room or a spicy dish in Luoyang), 'Mao likes red chilli; he powders his dish with it', Barthes hints at not only a future text on China but at the very writing of these diaries:

One possibility for a text on China would be to *sweep* across it, from the most serious, the most structured (the burning political issues) to the subtlest, most futile things (chilli, peonies). (TiC 95)

This 'text' is never published in Barthes's lifetime. It certainly is hinted at in 'Well, and China?', but this article in *Le Monde* is concerned with his return to Paris and moreover with the expectations of him, on all sides of the political divide. It possibly exists as a 'text' in the seminar that he gives four days after his return, but which is published only posthumously (and, again, without Barthes's *imprimatur*).³² But before this stage of the journey, indeed whilst waiting at Orly airport at the very start of the first diary, Barthes sets the stylistic tone for the rest of the diaries. Following the slightly humorous opening of *Travels in China* – '11 April. Departure, washed from head to toe. Forgot to wash my ears. (TiC 5) – Barthes moves straight to one of the key issues surrounding his (and *Tel Quel*'s) views on China, namely what is expected of them on their return and what might actually get reported to French society:

Echo in *Le Quotidien de Paris*. They're expecting a *Return from China* and *Afterthoughts on China*. But what if they really got: *Afterthoughts on My Return to France*? (TiC 5)

Barthes was far too aware of the episode in André Gide's life when, in the mid-1930s, he made a similar visit to the Soviet Union and wrote *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* with the subtitle that Barthes has in mind, *And Afterthoughts on My Return*, for Barthes to actually carry out his threat – though it would be wrong to say that *Travels in China* does not contain occasional elements of this type of reflection on France.³³ More important to Barthes is the desire to get to know China, Chinese people and the Chinese way of life. In order to record his impressions, Barthes adopts, from the very start of the diaries, an elliptical form of notation, in which, firstly (and as we have seen above), voices and voicing are detached and abstracted from the body speaking, in what we might call Barthes's 'prosopopoeia', or ironic 'voice-off'³⁴; and, secondly, the frames of reference of the notation are swiftly overturned by a change of subject or a change in perception. For example, in the following Barthes's mind seems to be flitting, butterfly-like, between very different topics:

Go back over the echo in the *Quotidien de Paris*, show the lousy ethics it's based on.

How boring! To have the downsides of fame (the echo of a private trip) and none of the (financial) advantages.

If I were to be executed, I'd ask people not to bank on my courage. I'd like to be able to get slightly drunk beforehand (on Champagne and food).

They're huddled at the back of the plane, their eyes closed like – might I say this affectionately – little pigs, plump little animals; they're penned in too, in a sense.

I'd like to say, to J. L., to R., cynically (but they'd understand): become, in writing, *someone*. (TiC 6)

Rather than a pure stream of consciousness, this writing shows a mind in dialectical, abysmal turbulence, churning over current impressions, potential 'images' of himself that might emerge after his return, and thoughts about those people in France that are close to him at this time – presumably, Jean-Louis Bouttes and Roland Havas, both of whom were students in Barthes's EPHE seminar in 1974 and, possibly, (at different times) lovers of his.

Though it is not easy to fill in the ellipses between these very varied topics, the reader of Barthes's *Travels in China* learns very quickly that the ellipsis – the writing from 'spark to spark', from 'abyss to abyss', beloved of Nietzsche – will be the dominant mode of notation for the rest of the diaries. More importantly perhaps is that, following this opening, the elliptical notation style shifts ground to brief interjections, usually between square brackets, in which Barthes breaks off from the speedy note-taking in which he is involved to record a seemingly insignificant common and daily phenomenon. However, whereas, at the very start of the trip, Barthes describes in minute detail the people he sees around him in Tiananmen Square (TiC 8-9), by the time the mini-lectures by Chinese officials have started, his observations are no longer the main prose of the diaries, but interjected in square brackets between the recording of salient facts about Chinese production:

- Vegetables: last year, 230 million pounds + apples, pears, grape, rice, maize, wheat; 22,000 pigs + ducks.
[Long table covered with light-green waxed cloth. People on both sides. Clean. At the far end, five huge painted thermoses (their samovar)]
Stages: Mutual aid group [...]. (TiC 10)

However, as the trip goes on, these elliptical interjections in square brackets begin to concentrate on a number of themes: the tastes of different teas, the weather, countryside, sexual mores and social customs, Chinese clothes, faces and overall morphology of the Chinese body. It is as if these ellipses are moments of looking up in which Barthes can turn away from, refuse even, the 'bricks' of Chinese state ideology with which he is being bombarded; but which are also notations of an ethnographic character, sometimes graphically reproduced by Barthes in his occasional, amusing sketches. It is the descriptions of the tastes of the various regional teas that remain in this reader's mind, served from the ubiquitous thermos flask.³⁵ Barthes's semiological analysis of tea was well-known since the publication in 1970 of his essay on Japan *Empire of Signs*, the ritual of which was placed (in a positive manner) within Japan's codes of empty but significant social gestures. However, here in 1974, Barthes goes on to consider tea as one of the ideological phenomena that glue Chinese society together, when he gives his seminar on his return to Paris.³⁶ Indeed, the culture of tea-drinking that he experiences in China becomes part of the ethnographic 'blocking' ('verrouillage') of Chinese society for the Western visitor mindful of China's claims to be a 'progressive' and even 'advanced' society. He describes the function of tea in the seminar, alongside the other themes mentioned above – sexuality, countryside, social behaviour, lack of religion – as what he calls the 'insignificant non-political'.³⁷ This impenetrability of Chinese society – 'This impossibility to reply' – then becomes

the 'fadeur' of China for Barthes when he writes the controversial essay in *Le Monde*, 'Well, and China?' and takes up his 'unfathomable' stance of 'suspending' his judgment about China for his French readers.

However, there is one missing link in the genesis of this 'no comment' stance that Barthes finally and publically adopts in *Le Monde* with respect to (his trip to) China, that is the theme of politics, what he calls in the seminar on China 'The Political Text'.³⁸

Politics versus Politicisation

The whole trip: behind the double-glazed window of language and the Agency. (TiC 150)

As the trip goes on, Barthes's diaries are increasingly sceptical as to the accurate picture of life for Chinese people that is emerging:

[For this country, two sorts of pertinence: 1) Gaze of bourgeois democracy: Peyrefitte, admiration for the state, Efficiency, condemnation of indoctrination;³⁹ this point of view can be adopted and maintained *before* coming here. Coming here doesn't change anything; 2) Gaze from within socialism; debates: bureaucracy, Stalinism, power, class relations, etc. The opacity remains.] (TiC 111-2)

By the end of the visit, on the day before the return to Paris, Barthes seemed to have come to some kind of solution for this 'opacity'. Describing one French person's attempts to see China from the inside, and 'at the other end of the spectrum' those Westerners who 'continue to see China *from the point of view* of the West', Barthes has decided that both 'gazes are, for me wrong. The right gaze is *a sideways gaze*' (TiC 177). Then, on the last day, Barthes pursues his thoughts on the 'sideways gaze', in his quest to account for what he has seen, experienced and understood of Maoist China: '[It will be necessary to distinguish what I have learned *on the first level* and *on the second level* [...].]' (TiC 185). And after a brief aside on the 'excellent' ham and pork sandwiches and then on how it is impossible to get the Chinese 'to admit to the least anti-Stalinism', Barthes explains what he means by the two levels as part of a 'sideways gaze'. The formulation strikes me as classically dialectical:

[We would have:
I Level of the Signifier
II Level of the Signified (discourses produced)
III Level of the Text making and unmaking itself (real politics, struggle between different lines, etc.)] (TiC 186)

This is precisely the approach that is taken in the EPHE seminar on China that he gives four days after his return.

Here Barthes strikes me as perfectly Orwellian: 'politics' in China in 1974 is the opposite of the politicisation that Barthes wanted to enact in *Mythologies* (against the de-politicisation operated by bourgeois and petit-bourgeois ideology via myth). Here Barthes's diary looks very different from that written by Simon Leys during the first years of the Cultural Revolution, 1967-1969.⁴⁰ Though, in his diary, he becomes gradually more sceptical, Leys never engages in any politicised ethnography of China; whereas Barthes's diaries try to combine reportage (witnessing) and description of daily Chinese life and social realities, with a political distance that implies scepticism, and all in order for him to be expected to say the right things on his (eagerly awaited) return to France. No wonder that Barthes suffered heavily from migraines during his visit!

Must we then think of the ‘failure’ of these travel diaries? Certainly, these notes in the form of a diary were, probably, not meant by Barthes to be published. He even underlines in the 1974 seminar that China not being a country of the *haiku* like Japan means that there is a ‘poverty of my notes, of my own writing in this respect’.⁴¹ Nevertheless, at the end of *Travels in China*, reading through his ‘notes to make an index’, Barthes writes that ‘if [he] were to publish them as they are, it would be exactly a piece of Antonioni’ (TiC 195). He would begin the text, ‘(if I write one)’, with the contrast between the French and Chinese meals in the aeroplane; and he then ends notebook 3 with the following plan:

Summary: three admirations, two resistances, one question.

- I 1. Satisfaction of needs
- 2. Intermixing of layers
- 3. Style, Ethics
- II 1. Stereotypes
- 2. Morality
- III Place of Power (TiC 196)

It would take a further analysis of the seminar on China at the EPHE to establish the extent to which this dialectical formulation is implemented in his analysis. But one provisional suggestion is that Barthes, on his return to Paris, feels unable to achieve this. Indeed, the locking-away of Chinese life behind the uninterpretable practices of life such as tea-drinking, or the absence of sexualised interaction, seems to have led Barthes to see China as a society that was (for him) impossible to comment upon.

But what Barthes has, possibly inadvertently, given us in his *Travels in China*, is the outline of a critique of totalitarianism and its ideological functions; but also a fascinating impression of China under Mao that deploys the ‘voix off’ [voice-off, what we have called here ‘prosopopoeia’] that he had used, at least, since his 1967 essay ‘The Death of the Author’, or even since the “‘we must be dialectical’” injunction of 1960, which, between inverted commas, says so much about how Barthes thought *and* wrote in relation to the views and expectations that others might have of him. And even though China offered little or none of the charm he had encountered in Japan – ‘No trace of an incident, a fold, no trace of a *haiku*’ (TiC 75) – and in a ‘country where there’s nothing Political that’s Text’, in this ‘radicalism’ and ‘fanatical monologism’ of ‘monomaniac discourse’, a ‘*fabric* [or] text without a gap’ that ‘sharpen[s] one’s wits politically and infantilize[s] the rest’, in which he could not imagine living (TiC 173, 192), Barthes’s attention to minute details, his distractions from the scientific task in hand and his elliptical writing style in his diaries in China, afford us a glimpse of what this ‘fold’ – intensely political – might be.

¹ See Roland Barthes, ‘Authors and Writers’, in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 185-93 (p. 188 note 3): “‘we must be dialectical’”; the published English translation is slightly modified here as the italics are not carried over from the original French; see Barthes, *Essais critiques*, (Paris: Seuil, 1964), p. 150 note 5.

² Barthes, ‘On Gide and His Journal’, in *A Barthes Reader*, p. 3.

³ ‘La dialectique *parlée*’ writes Barthes – in a sentence which is, inexplicably, left out of the English translation – ‘est un vœu pieux’ [the *spoken* dialectic is wishful thinking]; see ‘Authors and Writers’, in *A Barthes Reader*, p. 188 note 3.

⁴ See Barthes, ‘Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers’, in *A Barthes Reader*, pp. 378-403 (p. 388).

⁵ See Barthes, 'Authors and Writers', in *A Barthes Reader*, p. 188 note 3.

⁶ Barthes, 'Une écriture dialectique', first published in *Combat* 5 July 1965, p. 6, and republished in Barthes, *Œuvres complètes* ed. Eric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), pp. 718-9; Barthes's Collected Works in French will be henceforth referenced as OC with the volume number in Roman numerals, and any translations, where they do not exist in English, are my own.

⁷ Barthes wrote of Morin's writing: 'As soon as an antinomy threatens to become fixed, Morin transports it "elsewhere", gives it some new terms that surround it and modifies the system of which it was a part; [...] he thus operates a veritable enlarging of meaning' (OC ii 718-9).

⁸ In Morin's work, wrote Barthes in 1965, '[t]he object of study is never given without its contradictory attributes, is only ever defined as a meeting-point [croisement], and which is falsely symmetrical, of a number of terms (this is the ancient notion of chiasma), whereby rhetoric becomes a veritable dialectical instrument; this is because only form is able, in the final instance, to correct the inability of language to make sense of the object's movement, of its alternating [contrariété] and generally of its other logic' (OC ii 719).

⁹ See R. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983); in 'Lesson in Writing', Barthes wrote: 'Antithesis is a privileged feature of our culture [...] Bunraku cares nothing for these contraries, for this antonymy that regulates our whole morality of discourse'; see *A Barthes Reader*, pp. 305-13 (p. 306).

¹⁰ Barthes, 'Alors, la Chine?', in *Le Monde* 24 May 1974 (OC iv 516-20); see Claude Coste, "'Alors La Chine?'" Roland Barthes', in Myriam Boucharenc and Joëlle Deluche eds, *Littérature et reportage* (Limoges : PULIM, 2001), pp. 339-53 (p. 352). 'Alors, la Chine?' has been translated into English as 'Well, and China?', trans. Lee Hildreth, *Discourse*, 8 (1986-87), pp. 116-120.

¹¹ Barthes, 'Compte rendu du voyage en Chine', in *Le Lexique de l'auteur. Séminaire à l'École pratique des hautes études 1973-1974*, ed. Anne Herschberg Pierrot (Paris: Seuil, 2010), pp. 227-45; all translations from this volume here are my own.

¹² This method was sharply in tune with the 'double consciousness' of Black-American philosophy, though Barthes, I am sure, had never read *Souls of Black Folk* or even heard of W.E.B. Dubois.

¹³ Barthes, *Travels in China*, ed. Anne Herschberg Pierrot, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), henceforth referenced in the text as 'TiC' followed by a page number. In the diaries, Barthes mentions, on a number of occasions (TiC 151, 154, 157-8, 176) meeting up with the China correspondent for *Le Monde*, Alain Bouc; this was doubtless the occasion for Barthes (and Wahl) to be invited to write something on China for the French daily on their return.

¹⁴ As well as a member of the *Tel Quel* delegation to China, François Wahl was Barthes's editor at Les Editions du Seuil and he considered that it was a complete betrayal (by Barthes's half-brother Michel Salzedo) to authorise the publication of both the *Mourning Diary* and the *Travels in China* diaries. Wahl maintains that, if the publication of the former would have 'disgusted' Barthes due to its 'violation' of his personal life, then the latter's publication would have been 'taboo' because it was 'not written' and infringed his 'absolute respect of writing and its own logic'; however, as Éric Marty pointed out, Wahl had, soon after Barthes's death, authorised the publication of Barthes's personal diaries, *Paris Evenings*, that were much more personal; see Jean Birnbaum, 'La publication d'inédits de Barthes embrase le cercle de ses disciples', in *Le Monde* 22 January 2009, p. 20. Parts of Barthes China diaries were published, in facsimile, in the catalogue for the 2002-2003 exhibition on Barthes at the Centre Pompidou; see Marianne Alphant and Nathalie Léger eds, *R/B. Roland Barthes. Catalogue de l'exposition Centre-Pompidou* (Paris: Seuil / Centre Pompidou / IMEC, 2002), pp. 208-25.

¹⁵ 'I am not Nietzschean, it is simply that I read Nietzsche', in Barthes, *Le Discours amoureux. Séminaire à l'École pratique des hautes études 1974-1976* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), p. 462.

¹⁶ 'On S/Z and *Empire of Signs*', interview with Raymond Bellour in *Les Lettres françaises*, 20 May 1970, in *The Grain of the Voice. Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 72.

¹⁷ For an analysis of Nietzsche's writing style, see Alexander Nehamas, 'The Most Multifarious Art of Style', in *Nietzsche. Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass. / London: Harvard University Press, 1985), ch. 1 (pp. 13-41).

¹⁸ See Simon Leys, cited in Coste, "'Alors La Chine?'" Roland Barthes', p. 352. In the English translation, 'abyssale' is translated as 'unfathomable'; see 'Footnote to a Barthesian Opusculé', in S. Leys, *Broken Images. Essays on Chinese Culture and Politics*, trans. Steve Cox (London: Allison and Busby, 1979), pp. 88-9, (p. 88).

¹⁹ Barthes's writings and interviews from the period 1970-1974 contain a number of asides that suggest his own illusions in the progressive nature of China during the Cultural Revolution; see, for example, the 1970 interview 'On theory' in *VH 101*, in *Œuvres complètes* III, p. 692; the conclusion of his radical 1971 essay (though not published in France till posthumously) in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 'Languages at war in a culture at peace', retitled '*Pax Culturalis*' in Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 105; and the 1972 interview in the pro-China weekly *Politique-Hebdo*, 'Fatalité de la

culture, limites de la contre-culture', in *Œuvres complètes* IV, p. 195. Although these comments favourable to Maoist China contain 'perhaps' and 'probably', they are striking for the curiosity that Barthes had for China in the years leading up to the trip in 1974.

²⁰ Michael Wood, 'Presence of Mind', in *London Review of Books*, 19 November 2009, pp. 11-12 (p. 12).

²¹ See Danielle Marx-Scouras, *The Cultural Politics of 'Tel Quel'. Literature and the Left in the Wake of Engagement* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1996), pp. 166-74.

²² See *La Quinzaine littéraire* 1-15 March 1975, pp. 22-3. Also, Barthes was a member of the editorial committee of the New-Left journal *Arguments* when, in 1961, it published a special number (no. 23, 3rd term) on China, 'Chine sans mythes', which included critical analyses by Trotskyists Pierre Naville and David Rousset, as well as an extract from the travel diary of R. H. S. Crossman.

²³ In his chapter on the *Tel Quel* visit to China, Philippe Forest sets out the debate and then rupture between Wahl (and to a certain extent Barthes) on the one hand, and Sollers and Kristeva on the other; in response to Wahl's reticent and mildly critical series of articles in *Le Monde* and which follows Barthes's – 'La Chine sans utopie' (15-19 June 1974) – the subsequent numbers of *Tel Quel* (59, 60 and 61) are largely given over to the journal's ongoing sinophilia; see Forest, *Histoire de 'Tel Quel', 1960-1982* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), pp. 475-85, and Patrick French, *The Time of Theory. A History of 'Tel Quel' (1960-1983)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 183-89. Kristeva's enthusiasm for the emancipation of women in China is set out in her 1974 essay *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (London / New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1986). The inevitable recanting, following Mao's death in September 1976, was expressed by Sollers in *Le Monde*, 22 October 1976.

²⁴ See Barthes, *Le Lexique de l'auteur*, p. 97, p. 324 and p. 349.

²⁵ In her recent biography, Tiphaine Samoyault underlines Barthes's reticence towards the diary, not the noting down, but the continuous (continual) writing out in full, what she calls, in opposition to Gide's diary-writing, Barthes's 'encyclopédie mobile et non totalisante'; see T. Samoyault, *Roland Barthes. Biographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), pp. 139-42. See also Barthes's 1979 article on his doubts about the writer's diary, 'Deliberation', in *The Rustle of Language*, pp. 359-73.

²⁶ See Barthes, *Le Lexique de l'auteur*, pp. 324-5; the 'vie comme texte' [life as text] is part of the unpublished sections not included in the final published version of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*.

²⁷ See Barthes, *Le Lexique de l'auteur*, p. 229 n. 1. As well as the source for the seminar, the diaries are described by Herschberg Pierrot as an 'étape' [stage] towards the article in *Le Monde*.

²⁸ Jean Birnbaum, 'Roland Barthes ose le cliché', in *Le Monde des livres*, 6 February 2009, pp. 1-2 (p. 1).

²⁹ Interview with M. Macé, 'Une écriture à même la vie', in *ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁰ In a technique of voicing the other – or 'prosopopoeia' – that he uses on a number of occasions, Barthes speaks as though he were a Chinese person as he castigates the Trotskyist Left Opposition in China during the revolutionary period of 1926 and 1927, in a way that sounds like the infamous 'Third' period in Stalin's Russia in the 1930s during which Trotskyists were deemed to be 'social fascists': '(Liu Renjing: became a Trotskyist 1927. 1929, creates Left opposition organization to Leninism. Trotskyists in China: in guise of the left, undermined the CPP, in collusion with the Kuomintang.) [...] Chen Duxiu: veered towards Trotskyism. Ultra Right = Ultra Left! [...]: on the left in appearance, on the right in essence. The end!' (TiC 36-7; on Stalin and Trotsky, see also TiC 184). Of course, this 'brick' of ideology against Trotskyism in China that Barthes was voicing here is a complete travesty of history; as Trotsky pointed out in 1927 (and Mao, at the time, seemed to share a similar view), it was the Chinese Communist Party, under strict instructions from Stalin and Bukharin, that united with the Kuomintang, with the disastrous consequences that ensued; see L. Trotsky, 'The Second Chinese Revolution, 1925-1927', in *The Age of Permanent Revolution* (New York: Dell, 1964), pp. 240-6.

³¹ See Sollers's editorial, 'A propos de "La Chine sans utopie"', *Tel Quel* no. 59 (Autumn 1974) p. 16.

³² In the seminar, Barthes is categorical about the status of what he is about to deliver to the students: 'I warn from the start. This rough and ready talk plays on the over-turning of appearances, a dialectic of illusions, no paragraph of which therefore is true in itself, the over-turning must be awaited each time: impossibility of quoting what I say'; see Barthes, *Le Lexique de l'auteur*, p. 230.

³³ See André Gide, *Back from the USSR*, trans. Dorothy Bussy (London: Secker and Warburg, 1939). Barthes returns to this idea a little later in the first diary in China, as he (inadvertently, it would seem) prefigures the title of his essay in *Le Monde* that he will go on to write on his return: 'So, what needs to be written isn't *So, what about China?*, but *So, what about France?*' (TiC 8). Interestingly, Barthes supplies part of the answer to this when, on the first evening, he describes the questioning of the *Tel Quel* delegation by 'the Writer' from China in relation to philosophical journals in France, their 'Object of Research', the influence of Soviet philosophy and its revisionism, and records their very revealing views on these questions (TiC 46-8). See also the moment at the Xinhua Printing Works in Beijing, on the second day of the visit (Sunday 14 April 1974),

described ecstatically by Barthes, but ironically qualified in the comment that followed: 'Everywhere banners saying 'Welcome to *Tel Quel*'. If only we could see French factories like this! *Tel Quel* in France? Every workshop: applause. [...] "But is it really rightfully yours, M. Barthes, this applause addressed to you by workers?"' (TiC 17-18). See also, in Notebook 2, where Barthes feels uncomfortable visiting workers hard at work: '[A bit shameful to be strolling around as tourists among these alienated workers at their labour]' (TiC 107).

³⁴ Other examples of Barthes's 'voicing' of Chinese people's views are evident; the following opinion is not presented between inverted commas for example: 'All this well-being has been accumulated by us ourselves. [...] Our own efforts, no need to request state investment' (TiC 11).

³⁵ For example: '[Shanghai tea is much less nice than Beijing tea, which was golden and perfumed]', but the former was better when '[more golden, with jasmine]', but the green tea in Shanghai is '[insipid and luke-warm]'. Though keen to analyse the 'Tea system', Barthes is finding, by the end of the first week, that the tea is 'insipid' (TiC 23, 32, 42, 51).

³⁶ See Barthes, *Le Lexique de l'auteur*, pp. 235-7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 236. Barthes mentions this 'blocking' in the diaries, considering it 'successful': '[Any book on China cannot help but be exoscopic. A selective, kaleidoscopic display.]' (TiC 165).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 239-45.

³⁹ Though he does not mention it, Barthes is perspicacious in citing Alain Peyrefitte's book and considering it part of 'bourgeois democracy', since the book is dedicated to (amongst others) one Maurice Papon, who, in 1981, was discovered to have participated, as the *préfet* in Bordeaux during the Nazi Occupation, in the transportation to the concentration camps of over a thousand Jewish-French children, and was convicted in 1998 of complicity in crimes against humanity; and this is not to mention his 'vigorous' suppression of Algerian nationalists in Constantine during the 1950s and his role as *préfet de police* in Paris when, in October 1961, up to two hundred Algerians were murdered by the French police; see A. Peyrefitte, *Quand la Chine s'éveillera .. le monde tremblera. Regards sur la voie chinoise* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), p. v.

⁴⁰ See Simon Leys, 'A Diary of the "Cultural Revolution"', in Leys, *The Chairman's New Clothes. Mao and the Cultural Revolution*, trans. Carol Appleyard and Patrick Goode (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), pp. 55-201, followed by three postscripts from 1971, 1974 and 1977 (pp. 202-10).

⁴¹ Barthes, *Le Lexique de l'auteur*, p. 238.