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On Blandness: Chinese Imports in Roland Barthes' Category of the 'Neutral'

Among the numerous trips by left – wing Western European intellectuals to Maoist China, the 1974 visit by a group of French intellectuals associated with the journal *Tel Quel*, including Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, is probably the most notorious. Today, however, it is mostly dismissed as politically naïve and at best treated in terms of an anecdotal history of events. Without belittling the dimension of political naiveté, my paper proposes a different approach to this trip and its literary harvest in order to bring out the productivity of the encounter with China in view of the respective intellectual and aesthetic projects. I would like to illustrate this by taking Roland Barthes' writings on China as an example.

After his trip, Barthes did not write a Chinese counterpart to his famous book on Japan, *L'Empire des signes* (1970), but only published a newspaper article entitled “Alors, la Chine?” – an article that was much criticised for abstaining from any clear assessment of the political situation in China. Yet, as I will show, the article develops the travel impression of a certain blandness (*fadeur*) in China into complex semiotic, aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological considerations. My paper will further explore the extent to which this notion of *fadeur* gains relevance for Barthes' subsequent thinking and writing. In particular, this question arises in connection with his interest in *le neutre* (the neutral). Undoubtedly, the category of the neutral is well present in Barthes' writings before his trip to China, but with his lecture course “Le Neutre” at the Collège de France in 1977 – 8, this category comes to the fore. By examining his notes for this course, my paper analyses how the ‘blandness’ encountered in China, but also references to Chinese literature and philosophy including the Daoist principle of *wu wei*, feed into his reflections.