

CHINA OF LABYRINTH: A REFERENTIAL READING OF
"EL JARDÍN DE SENDEROS QUE SE BIFURCAN"

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Since the 1980s, when Borges was first presented to Chinese readers, Asian scholars in Hispanic studies, like many others, have been enthusiastic about examining Borges's metaphysical narratives, especially the circular spaces and times, dreams and dual realities. Moreover, they found that China actually appears in Borges's works more often than they had expected. For example, in the story "Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva," thirteenth-century China, invaded and ruled by the Mongolians, is illustrated as a nation that actually conquers its own conquerors. China's *Yi Jing* is used as an example for the formation of the classics in Borges's essay "Sobre los clásicos." In another essay, "La muralla y los libros," Borges questions the concept of civilization from an observation of China's first emperor, who ordered the building of the Great Wall—a signature of Eastern culture, and the burning of books—a destruction of that same culture. In "Las mil y una noches" Borges views China as an Eastern cultural entity different from what the westerners have understood from the Arab world and India. In the stories "La viuda Ching, pirata" and "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," the protagonists are Chinese, and the plots develop around certain mysterious products of Chinese culture.¹ These texts construct an iconic image of China in Borges's literary world: an ancient empire with rich philosophy, mysterious figures, artworks, glamorous cities, and the Great Wall, a symbolic border between civilization and barbarism. However, there is a question of how to decipher Borges's attention to China and how to read the China of his narratives.

¹ This refers respectively to the legend of the dragon as symbol of the Chinese nation and Chinese emperor's origin, and the Chinese classical novel.

Most of the above mentioned texts do not have China in any central plot, but rather present China in a referential way. "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," however, sets Chinese culture on the main stage of the narrative. Critic Jonathan Spence believes that Borges is one of those Western writers who are deeply amazed by China, and says that this story is evidence of how Chinese culture serves as a major theme in Borges's literary world. Spence claims the story to be the writer's attempts at writing China (168).

Borges's story has its background set during World War I. Yu Tsun, a Chinese working for German intelligence in England, takes a journey to meet with a man named Albert. He finds out that Albert is a Sinologist who has just solved the mystery of an artwork by a Chinese scholar Tsui Pên. Knowing Yu Tsun is the great grandchild of Tsui Pên, Albert presents his research to him. Tsui Pên is said to have built a labyrinth (a garden of forking paths) and to have written a great novel about Chinese history. But the garden is never found, and the novel is so vast and clueless that no one can understand it. Albert solves the mystery and tells Yu Tsun that Tsui Pên's labyrinth and book are one and the same work. Albert advises Yu Tsun of the truth of such a work, that time is a forever dividing matter toward innumerable futures, and that in one of them they may be enemies. Yu Tsun then kills Albert. His scheme is to inform the Germans the name "Albert," a city where English artillery is gathering. The Germans read about the murder of the Sinologist, and they bomb the city of Albert.

Spence argues that, unlike Borges's other texts in which China is merely mentioned, this story contains a more detailed depiction of Chinese culture. First, the narrator Yu Tsun is Chinese, even though he works for the Germans; second, the concept of the labyrinth is a basic pattern of civilization in Chinese history. Besides, *Hong Lou Meng (Dream of the Red Chamber)*, a Chinese literary masterpiece, also appears in the story (172-73). Spence believes that the narration of the labyrinth in the text is an allegorical depiction of China by a western viewer, if not exactly Borges's own imagination, of China. According to Spence, what attracts Borges is not simply Chinese culture, but this culture's persistence in the search for perfection, and he claims that it is the same type of "persistence"

tence" that has motivated Borges to create his story (173). Some Chinese critics such as Wang Zehao and Zhang Yaqui also believe that this text carries unique interpretations of China's rich cultural tradition and its pattern of civilization, and therefore, provides a new channel for Chinese readers to reexamine their own history (Wang 37, Zhang 50).

In response to Spence's view, Hu Xudong points out that Spence follows a "popular" trend in intercultural studies, in which any alien cultural image can be compressed into certain critical concepts, such as "orientalism," "post-colonialism," or "exoticism" (138). Hu Xudong suggests that through these terms, different textual bodies, from a comic strip to a sophisticated novel, can be equally examined from an abstract ideological standard; meanwhile the truth of literature carried by different works is overlooked. He considers Spence's reading of Borges an "over-interpretation," and argues that the story is actually a game of writing that satisfies Borges's search for a "literature" for the literature; and "China" is only a "mask" in the play of Borges's writing, for it forms part of the internal tension in a game of narrative, but stays away from any serious or realistic allusion to the cultural connotation of China (144). Hu's point is echoed by Chinese critics Li Er, who suggests that Borges uses exotic objects to escape his own reality (299), and by Wang Qinfeng, believing that game-play with existing text is basic for Borges's literary creation (23-24). To a certain extent, these critics can even be supported by Borges himself, who once states "Mi fin es literario, no es histórico" ("El arte narrativo y la magia" 1: 226). In his essay "El escritor argentino y la tradición" Borges also has the following comment about writing a culture:

Gibbon observa que en el libro árabe por excelencia, en el *Alcorán*, no hay camellos; yo creo que si hubiera alguna duda sobre la autenticidad del *Alcorán*, bastaría esta ausencia de camellos para probar que es árabe. Fue escrito por Mahoma, y Mahoma, como árabe, no tenía por qué saber que los camellos eran especialmente árabes; eran para él parte de la realidad, no tenía por qué distinguirlos; en cambio, un falsario, un turista [...] lo primero que hubiera hecho es prodigar camellos, caravanas de camellos en cada página; pero

Mahoma, como árabe, estaba tranquilo: sabía que podía ser árabe sin camellos. (1: 270)

By the same token, writing about camels does not automatically grant a western writer a cultural-referential connection with the Arab world. One can reasonably observe Borges's writing of China through the same lens and question whether China is relevant in reading the cultural implication of the story. On the question of how to read Borges's attention to China, the arguments among the above-mentioned critics pose a further one: even if one supposes that Borges focuses only on the literary, instead of the historical, significance of China, can it be concluded that the text does not provide any further meaning to China?

While the above-mentioned critics bear different opinions about the role that China plays in this story, they all seem to ignore the generic elements of a murder mystery that surrounds China's image, even though the crime is a central plot in the narrative.

A reader can easily take the murder mystery as a starting point to understand this story, as the story falls well into a line of detective fiction, in which the narrative develops through the setting-up and solving of a series of questions, and therefore, constitutes a game played not only within the narrative but also with the reader. From this perspective, the outline of the story recalls for the reader Julio Cortázar's short story "Continuidad de los parques," which is about a murderer who sets off to kill a reader of the very text from which comes the murderer himself. Cortázar's story begins with a man reading a mystery at home. In that mystery a killer is passing through paths to hit his target. The narrative then focuses completely on the moves of the killer who finally arrives at a place where the reader of his journey will become his victim. In a very "economic" reading, that is to say, if one reads Borges's story purely as a criminal genre, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" can be interpreted in a manner similar to what Julio Cortázar displays in his story. A reader, Stephen Albert the sinologist, is studying the mystery of a labyrinth left by a Chinese scholar. At the wake of the mystery's solution, he is killed in a setting of glamorous eastern culture, by a man who comes from that same

culture, and from that same mystery, for the killer is a descendent of the Chinese scholar who has created the Labyrinth. Thus, the killing of the mystery's reader itself becomes a major case.

In this kind of reading, the game of espionage, or the journey of a killer, is a dominant factor in the narrative; while the narrative around the garden of forking paths from ancient China can be estimated as a beautifully decorated "bridge" that supports Yu Tsun's move from a hidden motive to a sudden revelation of brutality. The narrative about China and its labyrinth in this story may assume a function similar to the paths that the killer goes through in Cortázar's story, for it creates room for suspense and reading pleasure between a criminal scheme and an actual crime in a similar way.

However, different from many detective fictions whose sense of suspense is created with confused investigations or interrupted clues of one case, the criminal's "paths" in Borges's story lead into the sphere of a completely different mystery, and this second mystery, with presentations of its enigma, reasoning, and solution, actually forms a counterpart to the on-going crime in the narrative. Also, different from some other texts by Borges, in which China is figured with its philosophies, artists, emperors, and famous landscapes, in this story, China is represented by a labyrinth, an image and concept that Borges has accessed regularly.

A labyrinth is usually a game for people who enjoy finding the right path through false sensations of logic and direction. A good mystery is also of this type. However, anyone who wants to associate the labyrinth with Chinese culture should note that in Chinese literature there are two types of labyrinths. One, called "Mi Gong," meaning "maze" or "palace of mystery" literally, is a construction out of fine design, for the purpose of entertainment or protection; the other, named "Zhen," means an unusual battle array that functions as a trap for, or unexpected attack against, the enemy. The latter does not necessarily use a closed landscape; it depends more on formations of soldiers who move quickly under command, launch attacks in different ways, and do not allow any time or space for their challengers' escape. It is a labyrinth that involves uncertain factors such as contacts and struggles. Nobody

would fall in a “Zhen” voluntarily, and people may not realize the danger of a “Zhen” until they are fatally trapped and have to fight his way out in a limited time and space. This second kind of labyrinth in fact is better known in Chinese literature.²

The Chinese labyrinth described in Borges’s story is thus,

la imagen de la bifurcación en el tiempo, no en el espacio, [...] todos los desenlaces ocurren; cada uno es el punto de partida de otras bifurcaciones [...] los senderos de ese laberinto convergen [...] en uno de los pasados posibles usted es mi enemigo, en otro mi amigo (1: 477-78).

There is not enough information on whether Borges is aware of both types of labyrinths in China, but the image described above resembles more closely the second type, “Zhen,” in the sense that its pattern depends on the contacts among different parties; it is “unshapeable,” and cannot be completed without the involvement of a challenger.

Considering the mystery’s construction in “El jardín,” the whole story can be demasked as a labyrinth formed with multiple challenges launched by different parties. The most obvious one is the murder case, as the reader (including Yu Tsun’s German leader) needs to understand why Yu Tsun chooses to kill a Sinologist. Yu Tsun is also facing a mystery left by his ancestor, which concerns an artwork, and is solved by the Sinologist Albert. Moreover, while studying the mystery in the ancient artwork, Albert repeats the fate of the artwork’s creator, who is murdered before claiming success in his work. The text thus creates a modern version of an ancient murder mystery. The narrative of the text is set up as a circle in which each mystery is connected to the others through a network of time and space. In such a narrative, China does not remain a setting of the story. Instead, the idea of “China” becomes vague as the characters face the problems of identity in relation to it. Yu Tsun is Chinese by heritage, but German by commitment.³ He also lives with different realities, as both the mys-

² Such “Zhen” can be found in different versions of the well known Chinese folkloric tales such as *The Yang Warriors* (*Yang Jia Jiang*) and *Yue Fei Zhuan* (*Shuo Yue*).

³ Daniel Balderston has made thorough analysis on Yu Tsun’s identity and its

tery of his ancestor's works and the mystery of Albert's murder are presented through him. The sinologist, Albert, also evokes the problem of multiple identities, as his commitment to research makes him more connected to China than Yu Tsun, and by solving the mystery of a Chinese artwork, he becomes the spokesman for an ancient Chinese scholar. In the mean time, being English with a specifically English name, he is targeted for attack; and despite his erudite background, his life is sacrificed in a senseless way to accomplish a spy's mission during war time. For both Yu Tsun and Albert, China symbolically reflects the two characters's multiple identities. Meanwhile, the cultural entity of China that connects them is not stronger than, but secondary to, the name Albert, which is the connection that Yu Tsun makes between a murder case and a military secret. Therefore, China does not function with its historical or cultural significance in the narrative. To a point of representing mystery, China's identity is suspended or replaced, by labyrinth—the art of building a palace or a text—and is transformed from the traditional cultural and geographic realm into a textual poetic scope, in which time and space are uncertain and significant only for the reader. With such a metaphysical interpretation of “China” in the mystery, Borges offers us a channel through which to access his own literary conception of labyrinth.

No habrá nunca una puerta. Estás adentro
 Y el alcázar abarca el universo
 Y no tiene ni anverso ni reverso
 Ni externo muro ni secreto centro.
 No esperes que el rigor de tu camino
 Que tercamente se bifurca en otro,
 Que tercamente se bifurca en otro,
 Tendrá fin [...]. (“Laberinto” 2: 364)

In this poem by Borges, the labyrinth appears to be a metaphysical trap of universe; and in the following one, it appears to be a trap of fate.

Zeus no podrá desatar las redes
 De piedra que me cercan.

poetic implications beyond the Chinese background.

He olvidado los hombres que antes fui; sigo el odiado
 Camino de monótonas paredes
 Que es mi destino
 [...]

Sé que en la sombra hay Otro, cuya suerte
 Es fatigar las largas soledades
 Que tejen y destejen esta Hades
 Y ansiar mi sangre y devorar mi muerte.
 Nos buscamos los dos [...].
 ("El laberinto" 2: 365)

The Chinese labyrinth that Borges figures in the story may not carry similar significance in the poems, yet the sense of trap spreads through the plots. First, the two main characters each fall into a trap that will claim their lives. Yu Tsun is trapped in a hostile country and struggles to finish his last mission. For one moment, he suspects that Albert's residence is a trap, since its direction has a pattern of labyrinth. Indeed, he is trapped by Albert's masterly mind that figures out an ancient Chinese labyrinth, while Albert is fatally netted in Yu Tsun's espionage scheme, and his name is used to fabricate another trap for British intelligence.

The two poems also imply a question: when Borges writes about a labyrinth, where does he position himself? In the first poem, he seems to be out of the labyrinth, and in the second, he is in it. Can he be both? This question may hold a key connection between Borges and China in "El jardín."

If the story is examined alongside texts that involve both China and historic mysteries, such as "La muralla y los libros," one will find that the China Borges tries to represent in these writings is, consistently, not only a symbol of cultural achievement, but also a mirror reflecting the force of barbarism. "El jardín" can be observed also from this perspective. This story silhouettes the unity of opposites between the victim and the criminal: the mystery of an ancient artwork and the murder of its author, the Sinologist's solution of the mystery of the artwork and his own murder; the spy who is a descendent of the Chinese artist kills a true heir of his native culture and Yu Tsun's own destiny as one of the dead ends in the labyrinth. In this network of fatalities, at each cross of the

narrative paths, the search for the honor of civilization is ended by a crime. Thus, the story can be viewed as a mystery not only surrounding a plot of espionage but also based on the conflict between the fate of an ancient Chinese artwork and that of a modern world war, a narrative level, as well as an ideological level.

Although Borges does not clarify his thoughts on civilization and barbarism in this text, the ideological implication of China is consistent with the intertextuality formed by his other texts related to the image of China, which all have a backdrop of a dialectical relationship between culture and violence. The mystery of a civilization is more fascinating than its actual existence, while the mystery of barbarism cannot be simply interpreted by its destructive force. When the tragic fate of civilization is compressed into a mystery that calls for explanations, barbarism is always one explanation. In "El jardín," the focus of reading is also to shift between the presentation of a mystery and a rethinking of civilization and barbarism. Therefore, another text by Borges, "Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos" (1944), can also be taken into the referential reading, as it can shed some light on questions of the labyrinth and civilization, even though it does not mention China. The story is about two kings who visit each other's labyrinths. The Babylonian king builds a finely designed maze, in which his visitor the Arabian king is lost, and has to be guided out. Later, the Arabian king launches a war that destroys Babylon, and captures its king. He then lets the Babylonian king die of hunger and thirst in a vast desert, which the Arabian king claims to be his "labyrinth":

¡Oh, rey del tiempo y sustancia y cifra del siglo!, en Babilonia me quisiste perder en un laberinto de bronce con muchas escaleras, puertas y muros; ahora el Poderoso ha tenido a bien que te muestre el mío, donde no hay escaleras que subir, ni puertas que forzar, ni fatigosas galerías que recorrer, ni muros que te vedan el paso.
(1: 607)

Borges indicates that "the king of Babylon, with his lust for winding ways and devious complexity, stands for civilization, while the Arabian king stands for unrelieved barbarism" ("Commentaries" 271). The tension between Yu Tsun and Albert in "El jardín" can also reflect the type of confrontation in "Los dos reyes

y los dos laberintos," not only because, as Frank and Vosburg suggest, Yu Tsun is a spy, an agent of war, and Albert is a missionary and Sinologist, an agent of peace,⁴ but also because the trace of mystery in the narrative is similar to the other story. First, Albert invites Yu Tsun to examine an ancient artwork, which is a labyrinth, and he guides Yu through to reach the solution to the mystery of works by a master's mind. Then, Yu Tsun responds to Albert with simple yet stunning violence, and uses his murder to serve a war. In "los dos reyes," in which the significance of the labyrinth ranges from that of an exquisite human work to the use of wild Nature (the desert), in "El jardín" the labyrinth encompasses both an ancient artwork and a modern world war, and leaves China as a melancholic symbol of civilization whose fate is shadowed by the eternal threat of barbarism.

The text arguably contains an allegory of civilization and barbarism through the antagonism between the ancient labyrinth and the war time crime since the mysteries around the two fall in a dialectical relationship. The two mysteries are connected apparently by Yu Tsun's Chinese roots, on the end of which stands Tsui Pên, Yu's erudite ancestor. Both Yu and Tsui involve individual wills and schemes to fulfill a grand mission. Between Tsui Pen's ambition to complete an exquisite labyrinth and Yu Tsun's bloody plot, it seems easy to say that one's goal is nobler than the other. However, in the narrative, their works are equally valuable in constructing a mystery for their readers—respectively Albert the Sinologist, and German intelligence; and since Yu Tsun's plot of murder makes possible the revelation of all the other values in the story, the mystery on his part stays with this story's ultimate literary value.

Comparable to the previously mentioned two types of labyrinth in ancient China, in "Los dos reyes," the symbol of civilization is restricted to a "palace," while barbarism is free to move, to

⁴ Frank and Vosburg suggest: "Los nexos significativos que efectúan la union de los opuestos [entre Yu Tsun y Albert] son los siguientes: Yu Tsun (A) q1 viejo catedrático de ingles, q2 chino en Inglaterra, q3 espía, agente de Guerra, q4 en la biblioteca se convierte en estudiante de Stephen Albert. Stephen Albert (B) q1 viejo sinólogo, q2 inglés en China, q3 misionero, agente de paz, q4 en la biblioteca asume el papel de guía o de profesor de Yu Tsun" (526-27).

attack and conquer; it does not rely on any specific construction, but rather depends on something it can simply take and use. The desert does not have a meaning until the barbaric king names it; and, similar to the creation of "Zhen" in China, its purpose is not to form a labyrinth but to conquer another people. Likewise in "El jardín," Yu Tsun does not create in the way Albert or Tsui Pên does; he boldly utilizes a "nature" — something not of his own creation (Albert's name), to reach his goal. Like the Arab King, he gives the "nature" a new meaning, a meaning not commonly acceptable, but produced specifically for a purpose of war, and thus sacrifices a real artist's cause.

The resemblance between the confrontation of the two characters in "El jardín" and the confrontation in "Los dos reyes" not only suggests a dimension of literature in which barbarism can be more powerful than civilization, but also indicates that both are of human design, both need plotting and bold action; barbarism dwells in civilization, and it depends on the development of the latter to have its own growth. The outcome of barbarism may be chaotic, but it can also result from an exquisite mind at work.

The structural difference between the two texts is not crucial for a reading that relies on their similar ideological implication and thematic juxtaposition; as in both stories, civilization is valued in a metaphysical scope, abstract and distanced in the narrator's vision, while barbarism is accessed in a physical dimension, in which the narrative is developed, and the narrator's mission is carried out. In the meta-structure of detective fiction, in which the construction of a crime supports the construction of narrative, it is arguable that Borges's reflexive narrative pattern not only appears within the frame of solving a mystery and committing a crime simultaneously, but also encompasses different levels of access to inter-textual cultures. Reading "Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos" as a literary decoding of "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" can be a way to interpret the fantasy of "cyclic volume" or "circular works" presented by Borges, as the two stories can be each other's destiny even though not each other's solution.

Having reviewed the two ways of reading "El jardín" — as an example of detective genre and as a rethinking of civilization — I

would like to suggest that the notion of China is not only interpreted through the textual space of mystery in Borges's stories, but also extended into a poetic realm, in which the beauty of Eastern culture and the beauty of uncertainty form a mutual reflection.

Now the questions of locating Borges in or out of the labyrinth, posed by his two poems on labyrinth, "Los dos reyes" and "El jardín" can jointly provide some answers. If we observe the two poems within the context of rethinking civilization, we see that the trap of the universe depicted in the first poem, and the fate of being trapped in the second poem can well imply not only the destiny of the characters in both stories, but also the doomed civilization, different types of which have repeated the same fate of being destroyed by barbarism throughout history. A human being cannot observe this trapped fate of civilization without being part of it. The core value of these texts may be accessed from both in, and out of, the labyrinth of fate, the positioning of the author himself. Locating a relative position between Borges and the labyrinth is in fact associating the author with his works in an allegorical way. In "Los dos reyes" and "El jardín" respectively, the maze created by the Babylonian king and the Chinese labyrinth studied by Albert are more valuable in a historic sense. The "labyrinth" of the Arab King and Yu Tsun's scheme are of greater value literarily, for the birth of a text, as Borges has stated: "Mi fin es literario, no es histórico" (1: 226). The act of naming—for a desert to be the labyrinth or for a Sinologist's death to be a war message—is more powerful an impact than an allusion to certain intellectual work, because it engages a wisdom out of a blend of human spirit and nature.

Naming is not an act of construction, except within literature. In an observation of the notion(s) of labyrinth implied by the two stories, it is arguable that Borges's role in "El jardín" resembles that of both the kings in the other story. He represents exquisite Chinese culture through the actual construction of a text, like what the Babylonian king does for his maze. Meanwhile, like the Arabian king who names a desert to be his labyrinth to launch a war, he names China as his labyrinth—or a labyrinth as his China—so as to carry out the values he believes in within lit-

erature. From such a stand one can easily agree with what James Irby suggests: "Borges's stories may seem mere formalist games, mathematical experiments devoid of any sense of human responsibility and unrelated even to the author's own life, but quite the opposite is true" (xx). The labyrinths, built upon the persistent bonds between civilization and barbarism, form part of the author's original explorations of literature; and when such effort is made through the image of China, civilization seems to be always on the melancholic side of his exploration, and barbarism, on the fascinating side.

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