

THE NOVEL OR THE GARDEN? BORGES' POSTMODERN DIALOGUE WITH CHINA

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Abstract: "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941) by the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges is of a highly intelligent design, full of postmodern twists. From The Thousand and One Nights, which Borges read as a child, and later from Chinese culture, Borges learned the concept of infinity and paradox that became some of the important seeds for his stance on global postmodernism. Such stance is illustrated by the cultural and postmodern relativism embodied in the blurred boundary between fiction and reality and between the East and the West. Complex and layered, the story's narrative cleverly plays with infinite possibilities of East-West relations in the future. The story's final refusal to closure allows the reader to engage in new dialogues between the East and the West. In doing so, the story invites the reader to evaluate the relevance of this kind of cultural and epistemological relativism embodied in this remarkable story to the global world we all now live in.

In the preface to his book *The Order of Things* the French cultural critic Michel Foucault makes a reference to the classification of Chinese animals that consists of fourteen categories found in a Chinese encyclopedia supposedly made known to the literary market by the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. This highly influential preface has ever since given the reader the impression of the unique ways in which the Chinese classify animals. Little did Foucault and, possibly his readers, know that this classification of animals was a postmodern fabrication orchestrated by Borges, who is now known to enjoy playing with blurring the line between fiction and reality. Foucault probably would not have minded whether the

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classification was reality or fiction because he was using it not only to launch his postmodern critique of rigid categorization of reality but to introduce the postmodern notion of heterotopias, a fluid region simultaneously belonging to multiple zones. Likewise, Foucault probably would not have cared about why Borges made up this animal classification story. But Foucault's reference to Borges clearly indicates their common postmodern understanding of reality and their shared notions of aesthetics and ethics. The sources for Borges' postmodern metaphysics are vastly varied. From Pascal and Bruno, Borges found the dialectic relationship between center and periphery. Borges quotes Pascal in his essay "The fearful Sphere of Pascal," "God is an intelligible sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere" (Borges, 1962: 190). Postmodern writers such as Franz Kafka, to whom Borges devoted an essay: "Kafka and his Precursors" (Ibid, 1962) has significant influence on him. The Chinese culture is another contributing element. In his essay "A New Refutation of Time" (Ibid,1962) Borges makes references to ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuang Tzu's (369 B.C.-286 B. C.) famous writing about his dream of being a butterfly and himself at the same time and used this legend to support his refutation of the linear progression of time. This legend is from H. A. Giles's book *Zhuang Tzu* (1889), which Borges read. What Zhuang Tzu presents in his dream story is the idea of the identity of/in opposites, an idea Borges greatly appreciates. In support of Zhuang Tzu's idea, Borges writes: "Are not these moments which coincide one and the same?" (Ibid: 231). In a footnote to the essay "Avatars of the Tortoise" in *Labyrinths* (Borges, 1964), Borges again makes a reference to *Chuang Tzu* to support his discussion of the infinite of time (Ibid: 203). From the book *The Thousand and One Nights* Borges found the same counter-time idea in the infinite and circular narrative structure.¹ Of course, one more important source one should not ignore is Borges' own Argentine cultural and literary traditions; authors such as Don Quixote have had considerable impact on Borges' development as a

¹ Many other postmodern writers have questioned the notion of time as a forward-moving concept for dealing with reality. Joyce and Beckett are masters in this regard as evidenced in the circular structure of their fictional works (*Ulysses*, *Trilogy*). Aldous Huxley also is concerned with the validity of time as a governing principle of life as shown in his novel *Time Must Have a Stop*, in which he links the tyranny of time to Western materialism. Writing from a postfeminist point of view, Julie Kristeva argues for the notion of women's time, which is circular and in tune with nature.

postmodern writer, as evidenced by his essay “Partial Magic in the Quixote” collected in *Labyrinths*. Instead of using Foucauldian terminology like heterotopias, Borges’ postmodern ideas are articulated through images, metaphors, ironies, and paradoxes such as mazes, labyrinths, and gardens of forking paths.

Foucault’s reference to Borges thus has opened a door for exploring their shared notion of heterotopias/labyrinth through Borges’ dialogue with China manifested in a number of works, but more tellingly in the story “The Garden of Forking Paths”, in which Borges depicts the cross-cultural encounter between the West and China in the form of a postmodern meta-story. While some critics have commented on this cross-cultural encounter from various points of view, they have not paid attention to the ways in which Borges’ postmodern aesthetics and ethics inform one another; that is, how the postmodern design of this story links to his inclusive ethics toward East-West encounters. In his highly perceptive essay “The ‘Other in Borges, Borges in Others,’” Kendziora Smith, for example, offers an analysis of Borges’ use of the concept of the “double” in his works. While I agree with Smith’s larger ideas that the concepts of duality and labyrinth are well-linked, I wish to supplement his argument by including “The Garden of Forking Paths” in the analysis since this story offers an equally compelling example to showcase the linkage between doubling and labyrinth. In doing so, I will also supplement Smith’s analysis by placing it in the cross-cultural context, which is crucial to illuminate the important intersection where Borges’ postmodern aesthetics and inclusive ethics as illustrated in “The Garden of Forking Paths” become an enmeshed whole.

For readers not familiar with Borges and his works, they may wonder why an Argentine author was interested in Chinese culture, and how he came to know about China. To the best of my knowledge, there are multiple sources from which Borges gained his knowledge of China. The first is the book titled *The Thousand and One Nights* or *Arabian Nights*, a collection of middle-Eastern folk tales. A number of these tales are set in China, which first opened the door for Borges to know China. Borges read this book in childhood and fell in love with it. In his essay *The Thousand and One Nights*, Borges discusses the West’s discovery of the East dating back to Dante and admits that this is “a subject I love so much, one I have loved since childhood” (Borges, 1980: 42). He then singles out *The Thousand and One Nights* as the book he “first read” (Ibid: 42) that first sparked his love of the subject of East-West encounters. From the circular narrative structure of this book, Borges learned the idea of the “infinity” (Ibid: 46) of time, which he would employ

in many of his stories later. The second source is his readings of authors who have written or talked about China. Borges mentions some of these authors in the same essay, of whom Virgil is one. Borges recounts that the young Virgil once touched “a piece of printed silk” (Ibid: 44) from China and later included the Chinese silk in his poem “Georgics.” Borges also mentions *The Natural History* by Pliny the Elder, in which Pliny “speaks of the Chinese” (Ibid: 44). In addition, Borges refers to Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan” that describes the Mongol Emperor Kubla Khan’s visit to the city of Xanadu and Marco Polo’s stories about China. But to describe China as part of the Orient, as the West understood it in his time, Borges felt impelled to offer his definition of the Orient, one that would include “Tartary, China, Japan” (Ibid: 48) as part of the Orient. Borges’ admiration for China and the East is, perhaps, vividly articulated in his description of the Orient as “the Oriental sapphire, which comes from the East, and also the gold of morning” (Ibid: 47). Here Borges creatively invented this beautiful image of the East by tapping into his knowledge of German and Dante’s epic poem “Divine Comedy.” Borges’ invention is partly inspired by the German word of the East, which spells as *Morgenland*, and since *oro* means gold in Italian and Spanish, Borges liked the idea that the word Oriental has gold in it. From these references to the East, Borges came up with his own image of the East as an “Oriental sapphire” that comes from “the gold of morning.”²

Other sources from which Borges gained his knowledge of China include H. A. Giles’s book *Chuang Tzu* (1889), to which he referred in several of his books, and Arthur Waley’s book *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*. In his essay “The Wall and the Books” collected in *Labyrinths*, Borges discusses his reaction to a piece he read about the Chinese Emperor Shih Huang Ti or Qin Shi Huang (260-210 B.C.). Although it is not clear what this piece of writing is, it became a source of Borges’s knowledge of China. Still another importance source is Arthur Schopenhauer from whom Borges learned a great deal about a variety of Eastern wisdom religions and the dialectic of the inner will and the outer world. Borges made many references to Schopenhauer throughout his works, of which his reference to Schopenhauer’s book *The World as Will and Idea* in his essay “Buddhism” is particularly revealing. Borges found parallels of this dialectic in Buddhism, Hume, and Schopenhauer (Borges, 1980: 71). Yet, Borges is not the only author from the Latin American world who can appreciate cultural treasures in

² For more discussions of Borges’s relation to the East, see Fiddian.

the global world, not just in one's small national world. Some other authors from this part of the world also tend to see the East and the West mutually enlightening. They display "a respect for diversity" and "openness to the other" (Kushigian, 1991: 10), while at the same time share a sense of reflection and even uncertainty of that openness. The general lack of utopia in Borges' works dealing with East-West encounters may be attributable to this double-sided Hispanic Orientalism, which is to say that placing Borges in the company of these other Latin-American authors is to align him with the larger Latin-American cultural tradition.³

Published in 1941, "The Garden of Forking Paths" simultaneously illustrates Borges' dream of a mutually beneficial East-West relation and the insurmountable barriers for that dream. This dream is dramatized in the Ts'ui Pên-Albert plot line, in which the British missionary and sinologist Stephen Albert accidentally encounters a visitor to his house in England. The visitor is Dr. Yu Tsun, a former professor of English from the Hochschule at Tsingtao City, China, who was working as a spy for Germany during WWII. An extraordinary military situation compels Yu Tsun to send a message to his German Chief: the location of a British artillery station to be bombed by the Germans. The name of the location is "Albert." Yu Tsun quickly comes up with a plan: he has to kill someone named Albert so that his German Chief can hear the gunshot and detect the encrypted meaning of "Albert." Yu Tsun arrives at Albert's house, but he would never have expected what he would encounter at Albert's house: a lover of Chinese culture and sinologist, who knows far more about his Chinese ancestry than he does. Through Yu Tsun's encounter with Albert Borges not only reveals his hopeful and yet gloomy perceptions of East-West relations, which lead to multiple ironies regarding these relations, but to the global and inclusive ethic underlining these ironies. At the center of this East-West encounter is a meta-story of the infinite that makes fun of the logic of time.

Borges' hopeful perception of East-West relations is illustrated through Albert's engagement with a mysterious book written by Yu Tsun's great grandfather Ts'ui Pên, who served as Governor of Yunan Province, China, and was a man of many talents: chess player, poet, literary scholar, calligrapher, and astronomist. Yet Ts'ui Pên suddenly abandoned his power and money in order to

³ For a brief discussion on "The Garden of Forking Path," see Kushigian 25-26.

write “a book” and construct “a maze”. To do so, he shut himself up in the Pavilion of Limpid Solitude for thirteen years. When he died, he left his family nothing, except a heap of “chaotic manuscripts” that baffled his descendants, so they decided to have the manuscripts burned. Fortunately, his executor, a Taoist-Buddhist monk saved all the manuscripts and had them published. Because of the book’s intricate and maze-like design, it made no sense to anyone in the family, including Dr. Yu Tsun, a former professor of English in Qintao City, China, who joined his families in condemning the monk for publishing this chaotic book.⁴ Interestingly and also ironically, the fate of solving the riddle of this book falls not on a Chinese, but on a foreign national—the sinologist Stephen Albert, who spent many years in trying to figure out the mystery of this book, which is packed with fragments and contradictions, nothing more than a literary labyrinth. In his research, Albert discovered a fragment of “a letter” by Ts’ui Pên that reads “*I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths*”. In order to decode this enigmatic sentence, Albert carefully examines the book manuscript, imagines many possible scenarios of a book that is analogous to forking paths. Initially, Albert was not sure whether the garden and the book/novel are two items or one item since he imagined that Ts’ui Pên must have said that he wanted to write a book; at another time Ts’ui Pên must have said that he wanted to construct a labyrinth. Ts’ui Pên’s two incongruous statements baffled Albert, but he was able to crack the case by revealing that Ts’ui Pên’s novel/book and the maze are the same, which means the maze is not a physical object, as many people had taken it to be, but an ivory and literary labyrinth. At the same time, Albert was able to discover that the oneness of the novel and the maze is analogous to a physical garden with many forking paths, like the Pavilion of Limpid Solitude. These forking paths refer to the forking of time, not space, which is one of the most important ideas Ts’ui Pên wanted to convey through this story.⁵ Thus, Albert, an outsider to Yu Tsui’s family, unveiled a mystery no Chinese was able to uncover.

⁴ Some critics link Borges’s love for literary mazes to his experience as a library, where he found the library a huge maze with books and the bookcases containing endless knowledge. See Chibka.

⁵ Borges’s ingenuous doubling of the novel and the maze and their identical overlap with the garden can be seen as his vision of the Foucauldian heterotopias in the sense all the three entities share a common postmodern ground.

Many will wonder how Albert, a foreigner and an outsider, was able to perceive the intricate doubling and oneness relationship between the novel and the maze, and their similarity to a garden, between history and time, and between chaos and patterns. While the letter fragment Albert has provides some clues for the mystery of the book, his other interpretative tools include his familiarity with the postmodern notions of fiction and with Chinese culture, as well as his bold imagination, all of which he employs in the reconstruction of the book. However, the notion that Tsui Pen, back in his time, had a postmodern design for the book can sound rather strange to some since postmodernist fiction is generally believed to be a cultural product of post-World War II in the West, and supposedly it had not been known in China in Tsui Pen's time. In this sense, Tsui Pen's use of postmodern design of fiction seemed quite unconventional and even illogical. Yet, one can trace a possible source for the novel's postmodern design to Chinese Taoism and its scripture *Tao Te Ching* with both of which Ts'ui Pên was familiar. In ancient China, all government officials must pass rigorous "civil service exams" in order to serve in the government. The exam system became the major path to office only in the mid-Tang Dynasty and remained so until its abolition in 1905. Since the exams were based on knowledge of the classics and literary style, not technical expertise, successful candidates were generalists who shared a common language and culture, one shared even by those who failed. Through preparation for these exams, Ts'ui Pên must have become familiar with Taoism. The Taoist influence in Ts'ui Pên also can be seen from his resignation from his governor post in change for a literary life of solitude and peace. Interestingly, the poetic structure of *Tao Te Ching* contains substantial postmodern elements. Besides, the executor who published Ts'ui Pên's book is said to be a "Taoist or Buddhist monk", which further points to Ts'ui Pên's affiliation with Taoism. Taoism's affinity with postmodernism thus supports not circumventing postmodernism as a narrow periodizing Western notion, but as a non-periodizing global concept. Because Ts'ui Pên was ahead of his time in writing postmodernist fiction, no one in his time and much time after that could understand his crafty design, and this interpretative gap had existed until Albert took the time and effort to fill it. It was an extremely challenging task, yet Albert persisted, with astonishing tenacity. Albert not only "compared hundreds of manuscripts" with this book, but "corrected the errors that the negligence of the copyists has introduced" (Borges, 1980: 27-28). He also translated the entire book from Chinese to English. With all the research done, Albert is able to "guess the plan of this chaos . . . and to "re-establish . . . the primordial organization" of this

book (Borges, 1980: 28). Most important of all, Albert is able to discover that the book is about the infinity of time employed in fiction, although the word “time” does not appear in the story, the underlying message being absence is a powerful presence. The intricate explanation is best seen in Albert’s own words. He tells Yu Tsun:

The Garden of Forking Paths is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as Ts’ui Pên conceived of it. In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces *all* possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us. In the present one, which a favorable fate has granted me, you have arrived at my house; in another, while crossing the garden, you found me dead; in still another, I utter these same words, but I am a mistake, a ghost (Ibid: 28).

Albert’s intelligent decoding of the book’s underlying structure and Dr. Yu Tsun’s inability to do so indicates Borges’ vision of inclusive Orientalism that is congruent with Hispanic Orientalism on the one hand and his skepticism about a utopian vision of East-West encounters on the other. Through Albert’s process of solving Ts’ui Pên’s riddle, Borges shows a complementary, not an antagonistic, East-West relationship, one that demonstrates that the key to unlock the mystery of the East lies in the hands of Westerners. Here, the contrast between Albert’s passion for Ts’ui Pên’s book and Yu Tsun’s nonchalance toward it may seem promoting Western superiority in the sense that Albert, instead of Yu Tsun, holds the key to the mystery of Ts’ui Pên’s book. But seen from another perspective, this instance suggests the complementary function of the Other to the Self and vice versa: what Yu Tsun and his family could not understand as insiders is understood by Albert the outsider, who possesses intellectual and cultural angles the Chinese insiders lack. The larger point is that the East needs the West to better understand itself and vice versa; in so doing, the opposites of the East and the West, the Self and the Other are suspended, a notion prevalent in Hispanic Orientalism, which “distinguishes itself in a momentary blending of opposites and integration of images grounded in a respect for diversity. This Orientalism reflects not so much a

political posture towards the Orient rendered in innumerable oppositional structures, but is, rather, a more thoughtful approach that values a dialogue of discourses, reflecting an antithetical denial of and openness to the Other” (Kushigian, 1991: 10). The West’s openness to value and embrace cultural differences in the world, as exemplified by Albert, of course, can be aligned with many authors outside the Latin-American world, who share these Latin-American authors’ sense of openness toward the East.⁶

One may argue that postmodernism’s refusal to epistemological and ontological closure inevitably drives Borges to downplay the momentary blending of the East and the West with infinite alternatives, even at the cost of bitter ironies. The alternative Borges offers in the story is undercutting the fruitful East-West dialogue shown by the Albert-Ts’ui Pên plotline by having Yu Tsun kill Albert at the story’s end, thus significantly diminishes this fruitful dialogue. Logically, Yu Tsun’s arrival at Albert’s house offers a chance for Albert to build his friendship with Yu Tsun, but ironically their meeting becomes the moment when Albert permanently loses not only this chance but his life. Although Yu Tsun’s reason for killing Albert may seem unintentional, the result is the same: Yu Tsun kills a potential friend in order to help Albert’s enemy--the Germans, which can be interpreted as a treason given China’s anti-fascism stance. Ironically, again, Yu Tsun’s reason for helping Germany is not his love for Germany, but his love for China: “I didn’t do it for Germany, no, I care nothing about a barbarous country which imposed upon me the abjection of being a spy . . . I wanted to prove to him [the German Chief] that a yellow man could save his armies” (Borges, 1980: 21). The gunshot fired by Yu Tsun thus both physically and literarily severs the East-West bridge Albert had worked hard to build. However, this un-utopian ending is offset by the narrative gaps and the meta-narrator’s comments. The most significant narrative gap is found in the beginning of the story when the third-person narrator announces that ‘the first two pages of the document (Yu Tsun’s story) are missing” (Ibid: 19). The missing pages thus raise the question of the reliability of Yu Tsun’s story, which throws a degree of doubts on the validity of the entire story, thus making this story permanently incomplete until the two missing pages are found.

⁶ For examples of these authors, see Albright, Froula, Laurence, and Qian.

It should not be difficult to see that the story's narrative fissures, puzzling twists, and lack of final closure make itself a literary labyrinth, like the one written by Tsui Pen. Although Borges does not openly identify himself with Tsui Pen, he has a tendency to identify himself with the Chinese, some of whom being fictional/poetic characters. In his essay "Chinese Dragons" collected in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1984), he makes a reference to Lao Tzu (5/6th B. C.—531 B. C.), the legendary founder of Chinese Taoism, as an imperial librarian/archivist. Here, he identifies himself with Lao Tzu since he was once a librarian himself. Borges writes: [I]n my stories, I suppose the only character is myself. . .in imaginary times or in imaginary situations" (Ibid: 16). In addition, in his poem "El Guardian de Libros," he imagines himself to be a Chinese named Hsiang, who "guards the books". From these examples, one can infer that Borges' narrator in "The Garden of Forking Paths" and the fictional author Ts'ui Pên are indeed the same person because of the remarkable similarity in their execution of the forking concept of time. In this sense, the garden of forking paths is an invention simultaneously by Ts'ui Pên and Borges: by Borges in his novel, as interpreted by Albert, and by Borges' narrator as he/she successfully tells Albert's story. In the end, then, the diverse postmodern paths Borges ingenuously imagines in the story somehow ends up forking in this distinct heterotopian fashion: Borges' narrator and Ts'ui Pên are the same yet not the same; Tsui Pen's novel and Borges' story are the same yet not the same; Tsui Pen's novel and his garden are the same yet not the same; Borges' story and Albert's garden are the same yet not the same. To push these paradoxes a bit further: Borges and Ts'ui Pên, the East and the West are all the same yet not the same. Interestingly, these paradoxes centrally underlie the Taoist scripture *Tao Te Ching* written by Lao Tzu, with whom Borges identifies. It is up to the 21-century reader to evaluate the relevance of this kind of cultural and epistemological relativism embodied in this remarkable story to the global world we all now live in.

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