

## *Traveling China.*

### **Geographic and Semiotic Space in European Travel Reports of the late Qing Dynasty (1815 to 1912).**

Project outline; Prof. Dr. Benno Wagner (Chinese Culture University, Taipei)

This project sets out to present a comprehensive corpus of European (German, English, and French) travel writing from China and Taiwan during the Qing Dynasty (1815 – 1912) in a fully searchable and tagged digital corpus and to connect it to a digital workspace offering tools for public education and scholarly research. It pursues innovation at three levels: (1) it shifts travel writing from the framework of a sub-genre of humanistic literature to the *global network of transport, media, discourses and signs* that emerges in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; (2) it consequently presents *travel writing as a genuinely transnational and multilingual discourse*, and it thereby presents the *first comprehensive presentation of*, and investigation into *European travel writing from China*; (3) it uses *digital (multi)media as the adequate tool* to implement the previous two goals, and to expand and specify (to different user levels) the potential outreach of this research.

#### **1. Theoretical framework**

In the course of the nineteenth century travel writing underwent significant transformation when it became an integral part of the new “culture of exploration” (F. Driver). Whereas in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century traveling (the Grand Tour) was considered part of the individual’s education, traveling and travel writing were defined, supported and inspired by a scientific will to knowledge and an economic drive to explore and control new markets. Traveling was supported by scientific and merchant societies, writing about travel became part of a systematically planned practice. Scientific and popular journals inspired travel writers’ zeal for academic recognition and for public fame. In the second half of the century, the development of harbors, road and railroad networks increased the scope and speed of traveling. Telegraph networks and a rapidly growing printed press spread out and accelerated the circulation of knowledge, thus transforming the input and output channels of travel writers (Krajewski 2006). The rise of photography had a deep impact on the relationship between image and text in travel writing, as well as on the selection of its objects/topics. Cultural and ethnic stereotypes gained impact in politics and economic venture as they circulated between

travel writing, literature, and the printed press, thus reduplicating geographic space by semiotic space.

As compared to the previous centuries, travel writing was now based on a radically expanded archive of knowledge (as compared to the traditional “traveler’s library”), and circulating in a global network of communication. In this framework, travel writing is not simply communication about the area of reference, but also *communication about and with other nations exploring the same area*: a competition about national images in the strife for expansion of economic and political influence. If this description is correct, biblionomic categories describing travel writing as a *literary genre* created by *authors* within a *national literature* will serve at best as auxiliary (bibliographical) descriptors, or as “minesweeping tools” (Campbell 2002, 266). Instead, we propose to trace, unfold and display 19<sup>th</sup> century travel writing as a transnational and intermedial discourse based on various input and output media of circulation, connected to a variety of practices, and only partly determined by the individual skill and creativity of authors. While this situation indeed requires “new and powerful theoretical work” (Campbell 2002, 262), the solution is *not* to simply replace the concept of “locatable cultures” by the idea of a dislocated, ‘nomadic’ global discourse on national identities and ethnicity. Nor will it suffice to claim that China is at once the location of increased travel, and a dislocated, hence traveling signifier (as the project title indicates). Instead, we propose to follow the twofold, hence more complex, but empirically sound call of actor network theory to (1) unfold any location by tracing the positive set of global connections that produces it (“redistributing the local”; Latour 2005, 191ff.), and to (2) trace back all narratives of the ‘global’ to the places where they are being produced and displayed (“localizing the global”) (cf. Latour 2005, 173ff.). In other words: If we wish to unfold, explore and display the complexity and logic of this new discourse on China, geographic space and place need to be connected to the transportation networks, media channels and repertoire of signs, and, in an inverse movement, to trace the ‘nomadic’ signifiers for China and things Chinese back to the sites where they are produced, and to the channels circulating them. Our project will address the methodological challenge to positively retrace *travel writing as a complex of actor networks* consisting of media, institutions, technologies, humans, and signs (Latour 2005, 64f.) by developing a digital workspace to store, analyze, and make visible 19<sup>th</sup> century travel writing from China and Formosa (1815 to 1912).

[...]

## 5. Literature

Campbell, Mary Baine. "Travel writing and its theory." *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Ed. Hulme, Peter, and Tim Youngs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002. 261-278.

Bridges, Roy. "Exploration and travel outside Europe (1720-1914)." *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Ed. Hulme, Peter, and Tim Youngs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, 53-69.

Dittmar, Julius. *Im neuen China. Reiseeindrücke von J. Dittmar*. Cöln: Schaffstein 1912.

Driver, Felix. *Geography Militant. Cultures of Exploration and Empire*. Oxford: Blackwell 2001.

Hulme, Peter, and Tim Youngs (eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, 53-69.

Krajewski, Markus. *Restlosigkeit: Weltprojekte um 1900*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer 2006.

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005.

Roy, Denny. *Taiwan. A Political History*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press 2003.