



# China Hands

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# China Hands

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## BIG FISH VS. MONKEY KING

ZISHI LI asks the question, “Who will revitalize the Chinese animated film industry?”

I first noticed a post about *Big Fish and Chinese Flowering Crabapple* on the Internet back in high school. It is an upcoming Chinese animated fantasy film directed and produced by B&T, an animation company established by two young alumni from Tsinghua University. Released in 2008, its demo immediately received most of the Chinese national animation prizes and even participated in Mipcom Drama Festival in Cannes. The post claimed that the B&T animation company encountered a financial problem during the manufacturing process. In light of the great success of its demo, the producers called for an online crowdfunding,

The Chinese animation industry has been fighting against the conventional notion that animations are exclusively for children. Although such notion was rejected among audiences of DreamWorks’s *Kung Fu Panda* and Ghibli’s fantasy animated films, the Chinese animated film industry has been in continual decline since the 1980s. In hopes of enhancing the industry, the government provided subsidies to the animation producers, but it was allocated inclusively to all animation teams. Therefore, many recently established studios that hope to produce high-quality films are in want of further financial and technical support. Due to the overwhelming quantity of mass-produced childish animations in the Chinese animation industry, I had almost lost hope for these so-called animation professionals.

The demo of *Big Fish* is highly laudable considering it is the work of two amateur filmmakers. Various Chinese cultural elements are cleverly embedded in its intriguing plot. Moreover, the two producers’ story easily evokes people’s sympathy. Having no background in animation, Liang Xuan withdrew from Tsinghua University and cooperated with his friend Zhang Chun to establish B&T in 2005. They were motivated solely by their love for animation and a wish to boost the industry. After a long-term fundraising and three years of struggle, they finally began their project on *Big Fish*. B&T expected *Big Fish* to be phenomenal and “profoundly touch people’s hearts and bring them the power of love and hope.” Though I was once moved by B&T’s grand prospects, I doubt the credibility of their claim today and view them only as hollow. The screening of *Big Fish* was postponed from 2012 to 2015, then to February 2016. Many who participated in crowdfunding asked for an explanation and complained about the



producers’ frequent backtracking. Sharing the same screening schedule with two other topical films in summer 2015, *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* did not attract much attention at first. However, it amazed its initially small audience so much that its popularity exploded within several days. Its director Tian Xiaopeng is a professional with a fruitful career in animating. Feeling urged to break the slump in the Chinese animated film industry, he launched this film project to expand the story of the Monkey King, one of the main characters in the traditional Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. Although some imperfections do exist in the flow of the story and 3D movement transitions, its rich plot and excellent visual effects reflect the production team’s painstaking efforts. As *Monkey King* became the highest-grossing Chinese animated film, many on social media platforms started to share links of interviews with its production team, whose story is as evocative of sympathy as its counterpart in B&T.

Given the high risk of investing in animated films in China, Tian had great difficulty collecting sufficient money to continue with his project. Different from B&T, Tian never called for crowdfunding and kept *Monkey King* unknown to public. The creation process was an eight-year battle against everlasting dissensions with his teammates and an underdeveloped 3D technology in China. Despite the positive public appraisal, Tian humbly admitted that *Monkey King* was overrated: “It is the slump of the industry that makes our work receive more compliments than it actually deserves.” Director Tian’s success and modesty reinforced people’s diminishing trust in Chinese animation professionals—especially among the younger generation.

Animation is an industry that functions upon its own rules and involves collective efforts of a large team. Professionals like Tian are most likely to energize



the Chinese animated film industry. Familiar with how the industry functions, they have essential skills to balance creativity and productivity. If amateurs expect to turn their original ideas into new animated films, they have to strictly follow the professional procedures. It means to have a solid manufacturing team, the ability of giving out very specific instructions to each section of it, a fixed schedule, a finalized script, and a thorough marketing plan. If a producer fails to meet any of these requirements, an idea that may generate a good animated film will shrivel to an armchair strategy.

The two founders of B&T bravely advertised *Big Fish* as the booster of industry, but their lack of professional experience hampered their product and proved that the industry opens doors exclusively to people who truly understand it. The script of *Big Fish* is yet to be finalized. When making suggestions, they used ambiguous phrases such as “This is not what we want,” instead of concrete feedback. When negotiating with Japanese professionals on a collaboration project, B&T failed to convince the Japanese team of *Big Fish*’s potential. As B&T keeps struggling with logistical issues, they have already disappointed people who once had high hopes on them.

In view of Tian’s achievements in *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, the only solution to boost the Chinese animated film industry is to deliver sufficient resources to the right professionals. At this moment, the role of amateurs in this industry remains trivial, until the audiences evaluate the quality of *Big Fish* and *Chinese Flowering Crabapple* after its release—hopefully next year.

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## THE FUTURE OF THE CHINESE SCRIPT

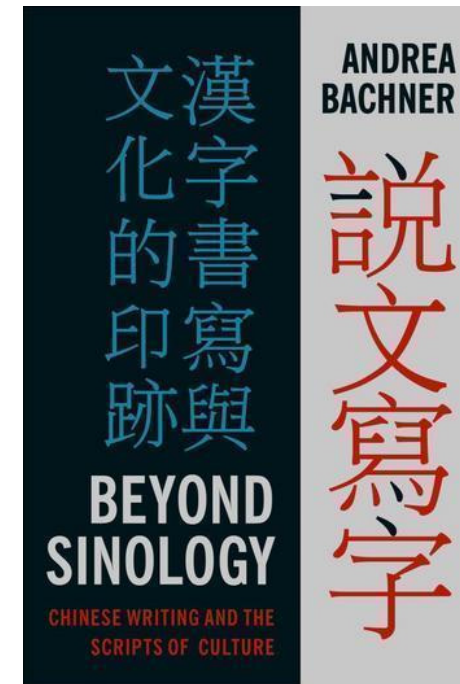
RACHEL LENG reviews *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture* by Andrea Bachner.

Andrea Bachner’s new book, *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture*, examines the shifting significance of the Chinese language in Sinophone literature and culture by focusing on script politics. The book’s main objective is to analyze what “binds language, scripts, and medial expressions to cultural and national identity” and illuminate how the “confluence of digital media and reshaping of global power structures impacts our understanding of the Chinese script.”

Challenging the commonly held perception that the Chinese case is an example of “truncated language reform” failing to achieve a “script of modernity,” Bachner posits that the sinograph (characters used in Chinese writing) is the outcome of national language politics. Thus, the book proposes working “beyond sinology” to read the Chinese script and culture with a transcultural and transmedial approach. *Beyond Sinology* is divided into five keyword chapters – Corpographies, Iconographies, Sonographies, Allographies, and Technographies – that discuss various multimodal forms, theoretical angles, and cultural contexts.

The first two chapters investigate how the sinograph maintains material affinity with human bodies and imagistic mimesis as media and language. Bachner debunks the myth equating sinographs to images, pointing out that only a small fraction of the Chinese lexicon actually compose pictographs. Bachner notes that the sinograph is suspended in between translation and transculturation as both image and text, signifying a specific Chinese cultural tradition but also gesturing at broader graphic expression. These first two chapters might have benefitted from moving beyond the China/West divide to consider alternative frameworks of language and national identity. In particular, comparison with Japanophone, Hispanophone, or Lusophone discourses might have enabled *Beyond Sinology* to further transcend an Orientalist perspective of sinology.

The third chapter on “Sonographies” serves as the book’s thematic bridge by examining the multimodal interactions between sinophone speech and writing, but assumes only one common Sinitic script. Bachner proposes the notion of “muteness envy” to describe the process whereby the sinograph



“leads to a multiplicity of disconnections and reconnections of writing and speech.” This chapter delves into close readings of Sinophone glossolalic poetry to identify the sinograph as a script where both sound and writing actively destabilize each other. The symbolic divide between image and speech evident in the case of sinographic homonyms is important, but this chapter assumes a standardized Sinitic lexicon across polyphonous contexts. The relationship between the sinograph as a Sinitic-script and other scripts used in China is important and should also be considered.

The last two chapters reflect upon the Chinese script’s adaption to foreign cultural systems and digital media with new modes of writing emphasizing phonetics. “Allographies” investigates Malaysian-Chinese and Taiwanese diasporic sites as examples of writings from the peripheries of the Chinese literary tradition. Bachner posits that such texts render the Sinitic script an other to itself, obscuring the connection between the sinograph and a monolithic imaginary of “Chineseness.” Although I applaud Bachner’s inclusion of Sinophone contributions, the writers discussed are still connected to essential cultural Chineseness within her framework of Chinese diaspora studies. Moreover, the chapter only studies writers from Taiwan, or Malaysian-Chinese writers who now reside in Taiwan, overlooking the numerous other productive Sinophone communities around the world. Representing these other communities would have most likely allowed Bachner to articulate a Sinophone that can produce different script politics beyond Sinocentric discourses and Western theories of signification.

“Technographies” addresses the sinograph’s artistic and pragmatic expression via forms of experimental poetry and Internet language. Bachner claims that the Chinese script adapts to digital principles and various visual interfaces, but at the same time retains “a nostalgic and material power in excess of, or even resistant to, the digital media revolution.” Bachner



considers Xu Bing’s 1987 *A Book from the Sky* and Taiwanese experimental writers Cao Zhilian and Hsia Yu’s various approaches to sinographic designs and Chinese pseudographics as examples of writing that challenge the cultural value of the Chinese script.

*Beyond Sinology* ends optimistically, asserting the malleability of the Chinese script in the wake of the digital revolution. Although an interesting proposition, whether the sinograph constitutes an “unusually stable linguistic and script system precisely because it translates well” is questionable. The problem here is that Bachner appears to define translation in limited terms of Chinese characters being digitally transferred into pictographic and iconic forms. Engaging with what scholars have written about the untranslatability of languages in general and of the Chinese script in particular may support Bachner in clarifying her position.

*Beyond Sinology* achieves a lot by offering a wide range of intermedial, comparative, and cross-cultural analyses in light of the Chinese script, but this expansive undertaking is riddled with vague, sometimes contradictory, remarks about the definition of sinology itself. In concluding, Bachner suggests that scholars should move “beyond sinology” by deploying “a new method of reading, a new sinology” that simultaneously “redefine[s] sinology and its traditional understandings of what counts as ‘Chinese.’” Yet, how is it possible to transcend sinology by adopting a newly invented model of it while simultaneously redefining it? These faults, however, lie gently on Bachner’s *Beyond Sinology*, whose bilingual and multimodal foray is highly recommended for anyone interested in Sinophone studies, sociolinguistics, comparative literature, and Chinese identity politics.

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