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A Chicano in China: Rudolfo Anaya's Journey Within a Journey

In mid-May of 1984, Rudolfo Anaya embarked upon a journey to China. Under the auspices W. K. Kellogg Foundation fellowship, nineteen recipients and some of their family members, including the author's wife, Patricia, traveled throughout that country for the period of one month. His chronicle of this venture, *A Chicano in China*, published by the University of New Mexico in 1986, represents not only a trek through physical space and chronological time to a country where he tunes himself to connections with its people (Jonesgard 77) but also a "journey . . . into the deep recesses of the mind, into the soul, into the blood memory"¹ (118) where he discovers himself both as an individual and as an integral member of the world community.

While composing the introduction to this "travelogue," as it were, Anaya chose to identify his experience as "a pilgrimage that turned out to be one of the most incredible journeys I have ever taken" (v). His use of the term "pilgrimage" in this instance, as well as its repetition throughout the text, is charged with meaning. Rather than connoting a mere physical passage from one place to another, it evokes a sacred quality. To quote *Webster's II: New College Dictionary*, a pilgrimage is "a journey to a holy place or shrine," "an extended journey or search, esp. one of exalted purpose" (835). In substance, his trip was much more than

a "profane" visit to the Orient. His written impressions repeatedly characterize it as a search for symbols and revelations (v), for "those simple secrets" (viii), for "the enlightenment that travel brings . . . in the process of the journey, around the corners . . . in distant places where we come face to face with the epiphany, the sudden shock of recognition" (vi). To quote Anaya once again: "That is how I have traveled, allowing the people and places to seep under my skin, to work their way into my blood, until I have become part of their secret" (vi). In his interview with David Jongeward subsequent to his voyage, he explained that said recognition, be it of a spiritual and/or philosophical orientation, leads to a synthesis and "[creation of] a new personal orientation, and, at least for me, a new world orientation" (Jonegard 70).

In his book, however, he reveals that the purpose behind this journey was not only personal but communal:

Sitting at night over my typewriter, I discovered I could leave my time and place and transport myself into other streams of time. But this is the work of a *brujo*, the task of the shaman, to fly into the other realms of time or heaven or hell and to rescue the souls of our characters. This is the work of the writer, to learn to fly. This is the imagination at work, or at play. It is playful as we are develish. It is the work of writers to arrange or rearrange that which we find in time. (123)

Thus, Anaya takes upon himself the role as shaman as he engages in flight within China, endeavors "to make that simple, human connection, which unites us all" (202), and relays his discoveries by means of the written word. Before probing and illustrating this assertion, it would be appropriate to provide some background with respect to the proverbial

calling of the shaman. These universal types are magical-religious beings who, by virtue of their mystical experiences, act as connectors or intermediaries between their charges and the supernatural. They typically require the assistance of one or more spirit helpers who instruct them during a voyage described as an altered state (i.e., dream, ecstasy, trance, or vision). Having descended and/or soared along the *Axis Mundi* located at the center of the cosmos, they come to know the very hub of life and death, heaven and earth, the still point between the pairs of opposites, and experience the dissolution of separateness and the attainment of balance in the field of the infinite (Halifax, *Shamanic Voices* 20). In essence, this phase of the shamanic experience endows the "flier" with a personality transformation, a figurative death and subsequent rebirth as a result of his newly acquired "enhanced knowledge . . . of the sacred geography and cosmology by which the community orders its social and supernatural environment" (Furst 219). Having connected with the sacred, this mediator fulfills his holy calling by returning to his community and creating order, connection and harmony out of communal disintegration and chaos (Halifax, *Shaman* 7).

Throughout his literary creations, the reader cannot but come to the conclusion that Anaya is driven by this same sense of responsibility. He continually attacks the material ideologies and precepts of the southwestern United States that separate people and cause them to lose touch with the original unity and harmony of the natural world (González 456 and Martínez 23). *A Chicano in China* is no different. He criticizes the Marxist materialistic interpretation of the universe that has caused them to give up their old gods and values (53). He indicts the modern Chinese

government which, like other contemporary political systems, teach ideological precepts that "separate people" (54).

This shaman-author, however, opts to focus on commonalities, on connections between himself, his community and the outside world. In essence, in his written "impressions" of China, he resists singling out the differences between the Chicanos and their Asian brothers and sisters. Instead, he identifies countless commonalities. Aware that "China is part of the old Asiatic world that sent its migrations of people across the Bering Straight thousands of years ago," he posits that "they are the real source of the Meso-American populations, the native American Indians, and the mythology and thought which has intrigued and interested [him] for many years" (3). Thus, during his visit to that country, he searches for "certain signs, certain symbols of value, certain archetypal memories of a biological nature, links, a history--an understanding of that other half of [his] nature, which whispers to [him]" (5).

In similitude of the protagonists in his novels, during his pilgrimage Anaya evidences a deep understanding of these archetypal messengers, including their call, rite of passage and mission, and even assumes the cardinal traits of the shaman. As in the accounts of shamanic figures worldwide, his journey has mythic underpinnings. In his article on short-story writing, he declared: "I do follow certain themes throughout the novels: the rite of passage, the coming into new awareness, the mythic element underlying--underpinning, so to speak--the Hispanic and native American culture" (Anaya, "Of cuentistas" 13). A *Chicano in China*, although a travelogue rather than a novel, follows this archetypal pattern. Let us now accompany Anaya in his "rite of initiation" to Asia, to the land that he recognizes as a main source of his ethnic and cultural heritage.

At the very inception of his travel account, he invites the reader to enter into the realm of myth. Endeavoring to convey the reasons behind his writing, he queries: "Where do I find the thread, the beginning, the desire, for this pilgrimage, this journey?" (4). In substance, through the image of the proverbial "thread," therefore, he evokes the "thread of the hero-path" (Campbell 25) such as that woven in the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. Moreover, through this image, he suggests the union, or interweaving of cultures and peoples, that he expects to discover and foster during and after his voyage to Asia: "I know why I am here: to connect streams of time, to connect people. To connect and connect and keep making the connections. I did not come to measure or count. I came to make love to China" (124). He adds that as "the waters of the Earth are connected," so also "is the memory of the people connected" (160).

Thus, Anaya departs in search of his beginnings, to recapture lost memory (7). First, however, he must find the threshold that will lead him from the profane to the sacred as illustrated in the following passage:

A visit to the origin, that is, the origin that does not belong to Spain, but to my secret origin, the origin of those migrations of people who came over the frozen Bering Strait thousands of years ago, across frozen waste land, against freezing wind, they came from Asia into the virgin Americas and created a new view of creation. They brought with them and preserved certain signs, certain symbols of value, certain archetypal memories of a biological nature, links, a history--an understanding of that other half of my nature, which whispers to me. Asia, land of the golden carp, Asia, land of beginning. Sipapu of the Americas, timeless land, I return to you to find

myself. It's that simple. I don't go to create a market for goods. I don't go to measure and count. Asia, I go to view myself in your waters, your mountains, your Great Wall, you Xi'an, your people. I will look at signs, I will listen, China, you are the door I will open. I know I will return loaded with snapshots, tourist images of me in Xi'an, me at the Great Wall, me at Peking. But that is only the image of the day. I will return full of the secret, the dream, the memory we call history. (6)

As the author repeatedly expresses throughout the travelogue, his ultimate objective is to decipher the signs and discover the treasure, the proverbial center. He longs to achieve "balance" (32 and 48), to be serene and "centered" (32). In essence, he expresses his belief that his mind will become the center, or point of encounter, of the yin-yang, "a union I will hold within my world, my castle, myself" (76).

Anaya firmly believes, therefore, that view himself by connecting to the Chinese(124), by relating to them "in their own time and place" (Martínez 15). This belief is corroborated as he ponders a number of very obvious socio-cultural congruences between China and the American Southwest: "Everything I found in China was like opening a book and having not only my life revealed to me, but a history I was connected to" (Jongeward 77). As his journey unfolds, he discovers on a very basic level numerous affinities between his homeland and his host country. By way of illustration, the Chinese rural folks, or "campesinos," and their farming villages trigger the following response in Anaya: "Grampa's folks" (19). His observation of the following within China evoke within him musings of similar, even identical phenomena experienced in his homeland. Examples of his perceived connections between these two areas of the world

including the work ethic of the farmers (19), the water "mayordomo" and traditional system of irrigation (41 and 89-90), the evening walks along the shoulders of the road (23), the "horses and warriors" (59), outhouses (70 and 94), dirt floors (74), the "village mercados" (89), cornfields (87), the shrugs and patience of the people (135), feelings of distrust toward foreigners (143), the gathering of elderly men to take the sun (7), and similar geographical features (118 and 127).

Similarly, he recognizes parallelisms between the poor urban neighborhoods of Spanish America and China. To provide a few examples, he connects the clean swept barrio streets (27) and the street vendors (27). To quote the author: "I feel as much at home here as I have felt walking the streets of Mexico. The hole-in-the wall shops are the same, people sitting on the sidewalks selling soft drinks, eggs, and vegetables are the same" (67). He feels at home with "the sea of people" (67).

Other points of similarity relate to his ethnicity and others' reactions to it. By way of illustration, his visit to "a symbol of Chinese resistance" (43), the Great Wall of China, causes him to question whether his Chicano brethren can withstand the attacks from without: "I wonder how the culture of the Hispanics will fare, the culture built by the grandfathers of the communes of the small villages. How battered is the Wall?" (43).

What Anaya encounters during his travels, therefore, are his "brown brothers" (17), his "brothers under the skin" (147-48). "I see myself," he declares, "in their eyes and the color of their skin" (95).

This validation of his cultural essence, however, goes beyond the socio-cultural to incorporate the mythical, as it were. As explained earlier, his experience within Asia is homologized to a journey toward the

proverbial center or spiritual rebirth. To set the stage, Anaya employs archetypal imagery. In Beijing at the Palace Grounds of the Forbidden City, Anaya realizes that he is "on the right track" (21) as he views the faces of the fierce dragons that look out at him from walls, from "gargoyles" (21). Suffice it to say that gargoyles, be they in the form of dragons, lions, devil-slayers with drawn swords, resentful dwarfs or winged bulls, constitute guardians which are typically located at the approaches and entrances to sacred space. At that transitional moment he experiences his first personal revelation in China. Studying the image of the dragon, he enjoys an epiphany upon discovering an archetypal congruency between its supreme power and that of "the flaming Quetzalcóatl of Mexico":

This is my first clue. This is the door I seek. In the faces of the people it is written: the migrations of the people from Asia across the Bering Strait, down into the Americas, thousands of years ago. Those Asiatic people came bringing their dragon dreams. (21)

The author locates a door toward "self-actualization" as he bridges apparent opposites and finds links with other people: ". . . I seek to go to the truth, the door which opens to the mystery of the universe" (100).

Anaya finds another connection between China and Meso-America as he contemplates a figure of Buddha. He receives a revelation that causes him to conclude that this divine personage is an aspect of Quetzalcóatl, the positive force that renounces the material world (48). As in the case of his contemplation of the gargoyles or dragons, the author recognizes that this awareness provides him another "door to enter" (48) toward his quest of "eternal truth" (48). Similar connections weave themselves throughout the entire text.

Anaya's shamanic journey also takes him to the summit of sacred mountains. Outside of Chengdu he and his travel companions ascend to a Taoist temple located high on the side of a mountain. They continue onward to the summit where "in the cool mist rests Shangging Palace, one of the most sacred places in all of China" (86). This power spot, described as "full of energy" (86), induces a meditation which results in another ego-expansive experience: "To walk to a sacred place is to make each step a journey; each step reveals the past, the present, and the future. That is the Tao. That is the truth of Christ. Love your fellow pilgrims--believers, sinners, curious seekers. We all seek the inner peace" (87). In a mythic mode, the well-worn granite blocks on which they trod are homologized to archetypal "stairs to heaven" (87). Suffice it to say that the motif of climbing very high mountains is an integral component of a shaman's journey (Eliade, *Patterns* 102).

In the pattern of archetypal voyagers throughout the world, Anaya's approach toward the center also has a downward trajectory. As in the case of all heroic travelers, he must make a descent in order to confront a dragon who guards a secret hoard of wealth or wisdom and must undergo a mimic, temporary death (Frye 127). Upon descending into a maw, gorge, valley, river, or other place that encloses, embraces, or ensnares, he must experience a dissolution of a former self and a rebirth to higher mode of being.

In shamanic fashion, subsequent to his visit to Shangging Palace, Anaya the voyager initiates his archetypal descent toward some additional enlightening experiences. At Chongqing, he baptizes the Yangtze as "the dragon river, the center of China," "the mother river of China" (115). He then assimilates it to the flow of blood through his body:

There must exist in every person's body the archetypal image of a river--the river journey. A journey deep into the deep recesses of the mind, into the soul, into the blood memory. To love that image in reality is a startling meeting of the yin and yang, a resolution of the dialectic. Here the river of dream is opening up before my eyes; here is a slice of magical realism I can understand. (118)

As we follow the chronology of travel adventures unfolding before us, it is abundantly clear that this leg of the trip, characterized as the starting point of Anaya's odyssey into the heart of his host country (120), enables him to "meet the reality of China" and be "transformed" (120). The boat glides down the river "like entering a stream of history" (121). It passes between mountains and "down the gorges" (122). Observing the life along the river, he finds the soul of China (122). He discovers parallels with his Chicano heritage and is able "to connect the streams of time, to connect the people" (124). Describing China as a seductive mistress, he states: "Today I enter her blood and mix my dream and thought with hers. For the day on the river, my faith in the people is renewed. I live in beauty, beauty before me, beauty around me, beauty all around me" (124).

The representation of China as a seductive mistress, as well as a "jealous woman" (79) who draws Anaya into her arms (105), who sucks him in (79) and holds him fast, first appears shortly after his arrival at Chengdu, the last stop before the Yangtze River cruise. It intensifies during the three-day voyage. This Feminine archetype suggests both negative and positive aspects. The former manifests itself in the power of the river and its surroundings to suck (120) him in. "The river of imagination" (118)

spreads her arms and thighs (122) and ensnares him. An especially graphic means of portraying the seductive and destructive nature of this part of his voyage is achieved through the author's allusions to "Terrible Mother" archetypes, to female devourers of men associated with ancient Greek mythology. By way of illustration, the author writes that "there is a Scylla lurking in every gorge" (121), Scylla being an once beautiful maiden, who, according to Greek mythology, was transformed into a monster. When she could reach toward a ship, she seized men for food. Comparing the Chinese craft to a "Greek boat" with "Greek sounds" (130), Anaya also evokes the sirens of old. Specifically, he describes how "the whirlpools dance beneath us and suck in the debris on the water" (127). He observes the following: "Here on the Yangtze there is a dragon, the song of the whirlpools" (128).

Thus, the thrashing and turning dragons in the brown waters of the Yangtze (117) convey the potential of both "the dragon of desire in [his] belly" (196) and the creative energy of his mind (118 and 137) to bring to pass his perdition or psychic disequilibrium. The reader is given to understand, however, that Anaya can complete his journey successfully only by mastering the first and by harnessing the second. Only through "creative imagination" (114) can he break through intellectual and cultural boundaries and make the connections between his Chicano and Chinese heritage. In substance, although this creative force can result in psychic imbalance if unchecked, it also has the potential of producing a positive result: a life-enhancing outcome, or rebirth. The following passage by Erich Neumann is helpful in appreciating this possibility: ". . . By entering into the maw of the unconscious, the ego is changed in its essential nature and is reborn 'another.' The transformation of the hero

through the dragon fight is a transfiguration, a glorification, indeed an apotheosis, the central feature of which is the birth to a higher mode of existence" (Neumann 149).

It is by no means coincidental that during the last leg of his river journey beginning in Wanxian he evokes both the maw and the womb: "The mountains grow steeper" (127) and he is "in awe of the majestic beauty and strength of the gorges" (127): "We go into each turn, deeper and deeper, and there is no release" (128). The numerous evocative "images of China" (133) parading before his eyes during his metamorphic pilgrimage are homologized to "the womb of time" (127) from which he eventually emerges transformed.

In *A Chicano in China* Anaya's creative imagination and energy are part and parcel of the numerous dreams that unfold within his psyche as he encounters both himself and the reality of China (120). In an interview with César González, he explained the following: "During my trip to China, I had a lot of dreams. In many ways they revealed interesting symbols to me and answers I was searching for" (Anaya, "An Interview" 2). In the shamanic mold, Anaya's transformative voyage consists of a number dream ecstasies or flights. These, characterized as "moments of awareness" (193) or epiphanies (vi), confer upon him "an understanding of that other half my nature" (5). In contrast to "straight-line thinking" (193), he describes them as "dreams of the imagination" (5), which are divorced from natural time and space. Characterized as responses from the collective unconscious to his travel observations, they carry him back into earlier states of human culture and afford him a means of understanding it better (Campbell 18). As Anaya declared in his article "Aztlán: a Homeland Without Boundaries":

Myth is our umbilical connection to the past, to the shared collective memory. After long years spent in the realm of imagination and creativity, I came to understand that many of the symbols which welled up from my subconscious were not learned, they were part of my ethos, symbols from the archetypal memory residing in the blood"

(Anaya, "Aztlán"
236).

Related to these imaginative meditations, or ecstasies, is still one additional element that aligns Anaya with shamanhood: the appearance within them of spirit helpers who can, according to Mircea Eliade, assist him "in locating the road to the center of the world, the door or hole in the sky through which he can ascend to heaven" (Eliade 95). In *A Chicano in China* the author identifies these guides as his grandfather and a shaman, his close friend Cruz. In his interview with Paul Vassallo, he explained this phenomenon: "I was very interested in the fact I needed mentors or guides to help me go through that fantastic country, and I found myself turning back again to my roots, to my grandfather, and a good friend of mine from Taos Pueblo, and they in a sense helped me go spiritually through China" (Anaya, "Of cuentistas" 17). According to him: ". . . This gave me courage that I needed to approach the country and the people, and to look for the symbols and those little secrets that I seemed to be searching for in the culture and in the people and in the land" (Anaya, "An Interview" 2). Therefore, his periodic dreams, whether occurring during sleeping or waking hours, are the means by which he pulls the people and their culture into himself (x) and makes the connections required of the shaman.

Upon the completion their voyage to sacred space, traditionally it is incumbent upon all mediators to put to use the knowledge gained during flight. Having connected with the sacred, and with the past, present, and future, they return to their community to bestow boons upon the people (Campbell 30), to share a new vision of the cosmos. Anaya is no different. He perceives that it is incumbent upon him to share with his Chicano community the sacred revelations and remedies received and recorded during his trip to China:

I feel fortunate to be able to see some of the wonders of the world, and one way to bring my experience back to my community was to record my personal impressions of China. I am the first Chicano from the Southwest to journey to China, and I returned with these observations of that incredible journey. These day-to-day notes are my communication with myself and with those back home. Communication, that's a part of the key to the journey of a humble pilgrim. (vii).

In their final form, his written insights about China constitute a humanistic gospel:

I have made my personal connection to China and I feel liberated; now I must work to liberate one more person--one at a time--and that person must work to liberate another. The process is continuous; it is a historical process, a slow march towards our eventual enlightenment--a knowledge and practice of our humanism. (177).

I know why I went to China. I went to make those connections to points of love, which exist in my soul. I went to connect my dream to the people of China. I will continue to make those connections, here, there, everywhere. I will not be afraid to dream. I will not be afraid to walk in the land of the billion Chinese people, to share my love with them, and to take their love. (202)

In sum, *A Chicano in China* is much more than a travelogue. As explained and illustrated in this paper, Anaya's primary driving force was to search for integration and harmony. Thus, using his voyage through physical space and chronometric time as a point of departure, he undertakes an oneiric "flight of the soul" (200) during which he encounters "a key to turn, a door to enter, a new way to see his role in the universe" (viii). In shamanic fashion, he embraces a humanistic posture that will lead him to "an integrated world based on mutual respect" (x). As he explains at the conclusion of his book, the "energy of love" (200) acquired through his travel experiences and recorded in his written impressions will "teach others to see into the soul of things, to make that simple human connection, which unites us all" (202).

Notes

¹Rudolfo Anaya, *A Chicano in China*. Albuquerque: New Mexico UP, 1986) 118. Subsequent references to this text will appear in parentheses.

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