Empires of the Mind

I. A. Richards and Basic English in China, 1929-1979

RODNEY KOENEKE

Empires of the Mind

I. A. RICHARDS

AND BASIC ENGLISH

IN CHINA, 1929-1979

Rodney Koeneke

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Koeneke, Rodney B.

Empires of the mind : I. A. Richards and Basic English in China, 1929–1979 / Rodney B. Koeneke.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8047-4822-5 (alk. paper)
1. Richards, I. A. (Ivor Armstrong), 1893—-Knowledge—Language and languages. 2. Richards, I. A. (Ivor Armstrong), 1893—-Knowledge—China. 3. Richards, I. A. (Ivor Armstrong), 1893—Journeys—China. 4. Richards, I. A. (Ivor Armstrong), 1893—-Influence. 5. English language—Study and teaching—Chinese speakers. 6. English philology—Study and teaching (Higher)—China. 7. British—China—History—20th century. 8. Educators—Great Britain—Biography. 9. Critics—Great Britain—Biography. 10. Language and culture—China. 11. Communication, International. 12. English language—China. 13. China—Languages. 14. Basic English. I. Title.

PR6035.I337 Z76 2004
828'.91209—dc21 2003011521

This book is printed on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Original printing 2004

Last figure below indicates year of this printing:
13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04

Designed and typeset at Stanford University Press in 10/13 Palatino

Contents

Empires of the Mind

1 Introduction

I

On February 9, 1950, noted educator and literary critic I. A. Richards boarded a U.S. liner bound for China. He was departing at a particularly inauspicious time. The Communists had recently ousted the Kuomintang, China's ruling party of the last twenty years, leaving the nation's affairs in a state of violent disorder. Hong Kong, Richards's first port-of-call, swarmed with refugees arriving daily from the mainland. Entry permits into China for foreigners were being denied with no official explanation. Reports of famine, civil uprising and revolt in the Chinese countryside filtered to the West from the exodus of residents displaced by the new regime. In Washington, officials fretted over the consequences of a hostile Communist China; five months later, the United States would be at war with North Korea and threatening to use the atomic bomb if the Chinese interfered.

Richards spent the voyage preparing lectures on Homer's *Iliad*. He wrote them in English, as he spoke almost no Chinese, for an audience of Western-language students at Yenching University, just outside Peking. To accompany the lectures he brought copies of the *Iliad* translated into Basic English, a simplified form of the language that he had been working on in China since his first stay over twenty years before. On the face of it, Richards's response seems odd. That the *Iliad*, that most fundamental of Western texts, could have practical value for the Chinese at such a time appears somewhat eccentric, even sinister. It implies an assumption of cultural superiority, evokes a familiar pattern of dominance and interference in Europe's encounters with other cultures. Yet Richards saw his actions in a very different light. The vision informing his lectures on the *Iliad*, and his involvement with China generally, was one of cultural pluralism and

communication on a global scale. This study is a history of that vision and the consequences of its application.

I. A. Richards was the leading English literary critic of his time. As a founder of the "Cambridge School" of English in the 1920's, he pioneered a rigorous, analytic approach to literature that sought to ground its principles on a systematic, "scientific" basis. His work in this area is widely considered to be the foundation of modern literary studies. Richards was also one of the first critics to champion literary modernism in Britain: his early advocacy of T. S. Eliot led to a life-long friendship. But his criticism in the Twenties addressed a whole range of postwar concerns. The cultural climate in Britain immediately following the First World War was exceptionally turbulent. For many intellectuals, the world described by Einstein, Freud and Eliot seemed radically different from the one they had known before the war. At the same time, a growing consumer and entertainment industry raised "highbrow" concerns about the direction of contemporary culture.[1] Richards was deeply involved with these issues and debates. His new "science" of criticism was fundamentally an attempt to reconcile the modernist sensibility with an older humanistic tradition—to update Matthew Arnold for a skeptical and scientific age. Borrowing elements from contemporary psychology, linguistics and philosophy, Richards argued for the continued value of poetry primarily as a highly complex form of communication. Readers who are able to respond fully to a poem, he reasoned, learn to perform the kind of intricate mental operations required for dealing with the new "information overload" of modern life. This in turn became for Richards part of a solution to the challenges of modernity that he believed could have global applications.

In 1929 Richards accepted a visiting professorship at Tsing Hua University in Peking. The trip was a watershed in his career. Richards's interests by this time had turned from criticism increasingly to theories of pedagogy. Teaching English literature to Chinese students offered the chance to test the validity of his ideas about reader reception and communication. The misunderstandings Richards encountered at Tsing Hua in the transmission of texts, even among advanced students and professors of English, convinced him that miscommunication was not merely a symptom of debased cultural life in Britain, but a severe world problem. He returned to Cambridge the

next year with a new orientation. Over the next fifty years China would occupy a significant place in his work and thought.

While Richards's literary and critical influence has been carefully studied, most accounts of his life tend to neglect the Far Eastern aspect of his career. His impact in Britain in the Twenties is seen as a pinnacle, the growing interests in China and pedagogy as a footnote to his critical work. As one critic describes it, "from the commanding heights, the very center of the cultural debate, [Richards] gradually wandered away—first to China and then to Harvard to work on primary education and linguistics."[2] Less dismissive assessments confirm this opinion in their thin treatment of Richards's period in the East. In an otherwise exhaustive treatment of his intellectual life and work, John Paul Russo's recent biography of Richards devotes just thirty-three pages of its nearly seven hundred to the years in China.[3] The single volume of Richards's letters published in 1990 also includes scant reference to China in a correspondence spanning nearly seventy years.[4] Even *I. A. Richards: Essays in His Honor*, a festschrift assembled in Richards's own lifetime and including valuable reminiscences and interviews, pays virtually no attention to his engagement with the Far East. At best, these sources treat Richards's experience in China as a spur to his thinking about language; more often, as an interlude or diversion in a primarily literary career.

One reason for this oversight is surely that on the surface, Richards's years in the East seem to have been a failure. The *Iliad* did not turn the tide in 1950; some months later, China was firmly Communist and closed to the Western democracies. Over the next decades, a period of radical change in China erased many marks of the pre-war years. At Richards's death in 1979, there seemed little to show for his time there. But given how bright the prospects had once been, and the intimate place that China occupied in his life and thought, the neglect of this period is harder to understand. Richards spent a total of nearly five years in the Far East, most of them concentrated in the 1930's. For the most part he was there in support of Basic English, a streamlined version of the language containing 850 words, including a mere 18 verbs, invented by his close friend and collaborator C. K. Ogden. Basic was intended primarily as an instructional tool for non-native speakers, though Richards and Ogden hoped it would also be of use to English speakers in purifying their language of unnecessary

rhetoric and cant. Rooted in the conviction that the First World War was the consequence of a gross breakdown in rational communication, Basic was designed as a logical medium for fostering better understanding between different cultures, while at the same time making scientific and technological knowledge more accessible to other nations. Its ambition and scope epitomized several aspects of Richards's thought. Most important among these was the conviction that language, any language, carries with it sophisticated philosophical propositions embedded in even its simplest words and statements. This made the teaching of English to the Chinese a very high-stakes game. Given the language skills to understand a text like the *Iliad*, even in an attenuated Basic form, Richards believed that the Chinese would have access to a whole range of Western ideas and values. This in turn was to help China in its scramble to modernize and enter an emergent global, industrial economy as an independent player.

Richards's invitation to teach English Literature at a Chinese university in 1929 came at a crucial moment in China's history. The offer itself was a sign of the larger transformations taking place within the country at that time. A century of invasion and imperial maltreatment had convinced many Chinese that major reforms were needed to stop the process of Western exploitation. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, serious efforts began in China to free the country from foreign influence. The Boxer Uprising of 1898–1901 starkly demonstrated the depth of hostility felt toward the Western powers in China, while highlighting the instability of its current regime. In 1911 revolution ousted the centuries-old Ching dynasty and began the tangled process of establishing a national government for China. The end of the First World War sparked further protests across the nation, particularly among students and intellectuals who felt deeply betrayed by Western concessions to Japan at the Paris Peace Conference. One result of these movements was a growing conviction on the part of many Chinese officials and intellectuals that development along Western lines offered the best defense against the humiliation of foreign encroachment.[5] A university like Tsing Hua, founded in 1924, reflected this outlook in its secular curriculum—a significant fact, given Christian missionaries' traditional control of Western education in China—and in its stress on sciences and Western languages. In inviting a literary scholar of Richards's stature, Tsing Hua was making a gesture toward the West that was in turn part of a larger

strategy to secure an independent future for China. Given these conditions, an idea like Basic English seemed to many Chinese an ideal solution to their country's problems.

Throughout the 1930's, the period of Richards's greatest activity in China, his hopes for Basic English appeared to be well founded. In 1936 he returned to Peking on a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, then in the process of extending its own program of economic modernization in China. Enlisting the help of both Chinese and resident Western scholars, Richards established the Orthological Institute of China. Fundamentally an organ for Basic English, the Institute set to work researching language-teaching techniques at both the secondary school and university levels. The Chinese educational system left much of the responsibility for language instruction with the universities, where students were also expected to be reading advanced English texts. Richards felt that structured English teaching should begin much earlier. He began preparing a series of Basic English primers for use in Chinese secondary schools and widening his contacts in the university circles of Peking. When Richards left to teach at Harvard at the end of the year, the Institute was well on the way to developing a comprehensive program of teaching materials for students and instructors.

Back in Peking on a renewed grant from the Rockefeller in 1937–38, Richards and several of his Chinese colleagues were invited to take part in the Nationalist Government's newly formed Committee on Secondary Education. Meeting in the capital at Nanking and including educators from around the country, the Committee was asked to reform the national curriculum for the secondary schools of China. In May 1937, the Nationalist Ministry of Education agreed to adopt Basic English in schools across the country, appointing the Orthological Institute to develop a workable program. This was the culmination of Richards's hopes for Basic in China, and promised to be the beginning of a series of triumphs for Basic internationally. It was also the last and greatest success Basic English was to win.

On July 26, 1937, the Japanese invaded Peking. Richards and his wife Dorothea watched as the trenches were dug in the streets and Japanese planes bombed the city by night. They witnessed the columns of Japanese troops pass in triumph through the city gates, staying in Peking through the initial stages of occupation. The situation for Basic English in wartime China looked nearly hopeless. Low

on resources and badly disorganized, the Nationalist government was in no position to make language instruction a priority. But Richards managed to keep the Orthological Institute in operation during the war. In 1938 the combined universities of Peking, under the pressure of Japanese occupation, fled for unoccupied territory in Yunnan, a rural Chinese province over 3,000 miles south-east of Peking and out of range for the moment from Japanese bombs. Here, in the city of Kunming, Richards regrouped the Orthological Institute and, with further support from the Rockefeller Foundation, ensured that its work would continue. Richards himself returned to the United States to take a position at Harvard, where he felt that his efforts on behalf of Basic and the British cause would be more effective. He remained at Harvard for the duration of the war, keeping in contact with the Kunming institute as closely as conditions allowed. In spite of wartime hardships and the worsening fortunes of the Nationalist resistance, reports from the Institute sounded hopeful. The governor of Yunnan was supportive of the Institute's work and promised to adopt Basic in schools across the province in peacetime. With the Nationalist government now based in Yunnan, it seemed possible for Basic to become a model, or "seedbed" as Richards called it, for language instruction in peacetime China.

Peace, however, proved to be elusive. Immediately after the Allied defeat of Japan, civil war broke out in China between the Communists and the Nationalist government. Although the Rockefeller Foundation continued its support for the Orthological Institute, its presence by now was virtually symbolic. Richards shifted his attention to other areas, working on projects for Basic in Latin America and designing a humanities curriculum for Harvard. By 1950 the Communist victory was certain. The nature of the new regime, however, was still unclear. Though the Communists were committed to a program of economic modernization and reform, whether they would look to the Western democracies or to Russia for aid was still an open question, given China's tangled relations with both. In this highly charged political atmosphere, language became a vitally important issue in determining China's position among the Cold War powers. What languages would schools teach under the new government? Would Russian or English become the medium of technical instruction? Were Western languages to fall out of favor at the uni-

versities? These issues involved the entire status of China's future relations with the West.

In the spring of 1950, the Western Languages Department of Yenching University invited Richards to Peking to give a series of lectures on English literature and language instruction. Given the uncertain political environment, the gesture was a pointed one. The precise status of universities under the Communists was still in doubt; in spite of talk about trimming foreign languages and increasing the focus on science and engineering, no official changes had yet been made. Inviting Richards to speak was a way of registering approval for continued links with the West. Meanwhile, China's diplomatic relations with the United States and Europe were rapidly deteriorating. In Hong Kong Richards found many Western acquaintances who had been forced to leave the country at the Communist accession. In spite of the offer from Yenching, Richards's own chances of getting an entry permit to the mainland looked slim. After nearly a month of official delays, however, the government suddenly relented and allowed Richards entry, one of the first Westerners permitted to do so for some time.

This fourth stay in China lasted six months. Richards gave courses to English-language students on Communication Theory, Literary Criticism and Shakespeare. The experience was not a particularly encouraging one. Nearly fifteen years of continual war had badly decimated the student body, and Richards found the quality of those who remained sadly low. But he saw his lecturing as a serious chance to turn the tide in the ongoing government deliberations over a new university curriculum. Basic, he felt, might play a valuable role in keeping the channels of cultural exchange open between a Communist China and the Western democracies. This seemed particularly important to Richards given the promising changes he saw taking place under the new regime. After witnessing the corruption and inefficiency of the Nationalist government in the 1930's Richards, like other Western observers, found the Communists a remarkable improvement. Better housing, power and sanitation facilities were in the process of replacing the earlier squalor of Peking. The army, police and other civic officials seemed to function with a new competence and vigor. And most impressive to Richards, former opponents of the Communists were being given generous opportunities to re-

nounce their former "errors" in non-coercive group meetings and retreats. Although he saw many troubling aspects in the process of transformation, on the whole Richards found the changes encouraging: changes of the kind that he had always hoped Basic English could help the Chinese to make. Compared to Chiang Kai-shek's brutal purges of the universities during the war, in which many of Richards's acquaintances were ousted or killed, the Communists seemed a more humane alternative. Richards left China deeply impressed with their energy, orderliness and apparent preference for persuasion to force. "If the Empires of the future are the empires of the mind," he wrote home jubilantly, "I know who's going to win through."[6]

The cause for Richards's hopes began to evaporate almost before he left. In July 1950, toward the end of his stay, the United States entered into war with North Korea. Richards saw first-hand the panic and hatred that the U.S. intervention inspired in the Chinese; it seemed to verify all the anti-Western propaganda that he had found so objectionable in the new regime. On returning to Harvard in August, he began lecturing for greater tolerance and understanding of the Chinese situation in the face of what he saw as the blind stupidity of U.S. policy. But the political realities of the Cold War soon shut off any opportunities to maintain his contacts with China. Meanwhile, Basic English itself foundered internationally. Following the Second World War, its intentions became suspect to Americans and non-Westerners alike as a vestige of British imperialism, an impression which the sudden enthusiasm of Winston Churchill for Basic in 1943 did nothing to dispel. Ogden also grew increasingly jealous of his creation throughout the 1950's and came to see Richards's efforts on its behalf as a threat to his control of the venture. By the 1960's, the moment for Basic had clearly passed: perhaps nowhere more so than in China, now facing the massive disruption of the Cultural Revolution.

The coda to Richards's involvement in China was an invitation from the Chinese government to undertake a lecture tour in 1979. The offer was a gesture of rapprochement with the West after the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution. Richards was 86; against the advice of his doctors, he elected to go. The Chinese treated Richards with great respect and dignity, with old friends and delegations from the universities greeting him at each stop. Again he lectured on methods of English instruction, this time advocating English Through Pictures, a refinement of Basic developed over the years at Harvard.

Within two weeks of his arrival, however, Richards fell seriously ill and had to be hospitalized. On July 15, ten weeks after his arrival, it was decided that he should return to England for treatment. He was immediately flown back to Cambridge, where he died some weeks later. Promoting English in China had been the last undertaking of Richards's career.

II

Given the earlier scope of Richards's ambitions in China and the fate of Basic English generally, it is easy to see why his biographer, John Paul Russo, feels that "China had given Basic its first real defeat, and had given Richards his first defeat along with it."[7] But this rather summary assessment leaves some of the most crucial questions about his involvement in the Far East unasked. What are the factors that condition this kind of judgment? How did China become a field for Richards's ambitions to begin with? What were the historical circumstances that made the Basic project even possible? I would suggest that Richards's experience in China is best understood as an instance of cultural imperialism. For the Basic project was, quite clearly, a product of empire. The circumstances that brought a Cambridge don into a position of influence with Chinese educators and officials depended upon a complex history of colonialism and imperial resistance. It would not have been possible if Britain had not held an empire, or if China had not been forced to react to that empire. The very choice of English as a universal language highlights the historical situation against which Richards's thinking took shape. Perhaps less obviously, the Basic experiment was also dependent upon the cultural milieu that nourished a sensibility like Richards's and a concept like Basic English.

But what makes Richards's career particularly instructive in this regard is that he saw his own cultural project as fundamentally anti-imperial. Basic English, like so much of his thought, was inspired by an international, even "multi-cultural" perspective that bears little resemblance to the familiar imperial mind-set. The First World War had convinced Richards that notions of cultural or national superiority were inimical to world peace, and the years in China deepened his sense of the need for methods of thought that take a variety of perspectives into account. Moreover, many of Richards's insights resem-

ble the theoretical tools used by the most committed postcolonial critics working today. Edward Said, for one, has lauded Richards's theory of Multiple Definition, developed largely through his encounter with China, as "a genuine type of pluralism."[8]

And yet he brings the *Iliad* to China; sets out to modernize the "backward" Chinese; institutes the English language and literary canon in the name of progress—the familiar assumptions of empire. The central question of this study is how someone like Richards could involve himself in a project that looks so suspiciously "imperial" to contemporary eyes. What was it about the period that made the work in China look like the right thing for a committed intellectual such as Richards to do? What were the historical factors, the cultural contexts that shaped his sense of the world situation and made language seem the solution to its problems? What accounts for the initial promise of Basic English in China, and what led to its eclipse? Asking these questions will add to the complexity and depth of our current understanding of the intricate relationship between the intertwining realms of culture and empire.

To frame Richards's story in these terms, it is important to understand the semantic freight they carry today. In his recent study *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said summarizes some of the major shifts in the meaning of these two concepts over the last twenty years. Said argues that culture, far from being the disinterested repository of "the best which has been thought and said" that Matthew Arnold so famously imagined, in fact reflected and constituted the ideological assumptions sustaining imperial power. By creating the sense of a unique and essential European identity through novels, travelogues, operas, surveys, scientific investigations and other narrative forms, culture in fact *enabled* empire. Said reasons that "the will, self-confidence, even arrogance necessary to maintain such a state of affairs [as empire] . . . are at least as significant as the number of people in the army or civil service, or the millions of pounds England derived from India."[9] He shows that the assumptions sustaining empire were more widespread than many scholars have supposed, finding in novels like Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* or Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, works that seem to have little explicit concern with matters of empire, a subtle but pervasive engagement with Britain's imperial identity. It is here, in narrative, that Said locates the constellation of attitudes linking cultural productions and imperial

behaviors. "The power to narrate," he writes, "or to block other narratives from forming and emerging is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them."[10]

For the purposes of understanding Richards's encounter with China, three notions of the linkage between culture and empire are particularly relevant. One is the power of language to shape cultural representations. This type of approach is that now familiar to historians as the "linguistic turn." Broadly speaking, this kind of interpretation replaces the Marxist view of history, with its fundamental reliance on material causation, and more traditional forms of cultural/intellectual history, emphasizing the transformative power of ideas, with a model that stresses the primacy of representations. To take one current example from British studies, the notion of "Englishness": a historian of the linguistic turn asks not what English culture or identity *is*—its causes, its essential features, its reality prior to the act of interpretation—but rather *how* the notion of what it means to be English has been represented at different stages in time. In the context of colonial history, this representational understanding of culture radically alters the picture of the imperial enterprise. It shifts the focus of empire from its more traditional sites in barracks, colonial outposts and government offices to surveys, primers, maps, studies, narratives. It centers largely on the *linguistic* domination imperialism exercised in the incessant naming, mapping and legislating of foreign territories and peoples; in the colonizers' insistent control over the means of translation, both of language and of the meanings that languages authorize.

In *Orientalism*, Said's ground-breaking study of Europe's engagement with the Near East, representation through language is the very engine of the imperial process. Claiming that the notion of the East owed less to factual observation than to a set of internally consistent ideas about the "Orient," he shows how Western colonizers were able to produce certain types of knowledge by representing the Near East as essentially different from or "other" than Europe. Seemingly disinterested fields of study—linguistics, history, philology, anthropology—consistently figured the Orient as a passive subject for European discovery and endeavor, a figuring that in turn sanctioned its colonization. The power of these disciplines to represent the East, along with the interlocking web of institutions which sustain them,

are part of the process Said calls Orientalism: "a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient."[11]

The Orientalist process implies another development that bears upon Richards's experience in China: a consciousness of the interests that inform representation. The understanding of culture as a system that perpetuates certain relationships of power brings a corresponding awareness of the voices and interests which that system obstructs. Said defines cultures as "humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, incorporate and validate, less benevolent in what they exclude and demote."[12] The focus on differences and particularities that those structures erase informs a great deal of recent work in the humanities. Historians are increasingly sensitive to the divisions of region, class, religion, race and gender that are effaced in negotiating cultural identities such as "Englishness." In the colonial situation, the process is more brutally explicit. Here the silence of the colonized is a precondition of the imperial enterprise. What sanctions Western representations of subject cultures is the assumption that these cultures cannot represent themselves. "Without significant exception," writes Said, "the universalizing discourses of modern Europe and the United States assume the silence, willing or otherwise, of the non-European world. There is incorporation; there is inclusion; there is direct rule; there is coercion. But there is only infrequently an acknowledgment that the colonized people should be heard from, their ideas known."[13] In its exclusive control of representation through cultural forms such as language, narrative, laws and institutions lies the power of the colonizer to subject and maintain empire.

This notion of exclusion leads some critics to take the enforced silence of the colonial subject as a starting point for their recovery of native voices. Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, for example, look to the gaps, obfuscations, contradictions and breaks in the written records *of* empire for traces of resistance *to* empire. In the "problems" and ellipses of imperial narratives these scholars find the signs of those groups systematically excluded from the authorized cultural narrative, worrying the record by their presence and defiance. In Bhabha's work on the Indian Mutiny, for instance, the "mystery" of circulating chapati bread carried between villages—a phenomenon that the official chronicles of the Mutiny are unable to account for—becomes the key to unlocking an entire pattern of peasant solidarity

and resistance.[14] A similar spirit informs the practice of the Subaltern Studies group, which reads the history of peasants or the "lower orders" in the colonial situation from the disjunctions and omissions of the authorized sources.[15]

The notion of subjects left outside or at the margins of culturally authorized narratives constitutes a third crucial aspect of the relationship between culture and imperialism: the necessity of imagined opposites. On this view, identity requires the representation of an opposite against which to define itself. To return to the case of England, Linda Colley has shown how being "English" by the eighteenth century was largely a matter of not being Catholic; an exclusionary definition that subsumed other differences of dialect, region, class or sect within the polarity of religion. In the Orientalist example, Said holds that "the insistence upon the essential opposition of Orient and Occident" bolstered the European project there, a project by which "Europe gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self."[16] What sanctions imperial behavior in this case is the cultural narratives that systematically represent willed or constructed categories such as East and West, colonizer and colonized, as essential, unchanging binary oppositions. In reaction, postcolonial scholarship tries to circumvent dialectical modes of thinking with a notion of cultural hybridity. "[W]e have never been as aware as we are now," Said writes, "of how oddly hybrid historical and cultural experiences are, of how they partake of many often contradictory experiences and domains, cross national boundaries, defy the police action of simple dogma and loud patriotism."[17] Homi Bhabha's recent volume of essays takes up the same point to argue that hybrid forms of identity, in refusing to conform to any one of the binary and essentializing terms through which cultural power operates, are a means of resisting the power of such categories.[18] The insistence upon the mixed or hybrid nature of cultural identities in these scholars is a response to a long experience of Western pronouncements about the "true" nature of subject peoples and territories, and is part of an attempt to break the circuit of cultural and imperial power.

These elements of the culture/empire equation—language, the silenced and the oppositional other—are relevant to Richards's story because his project in China intimately involved each one, though in ways that postcolonial scholarship may not be able to fully account

for. As a theorist of language, he was exceptionally alert to its power in creating our categories of thought. Richards saw the First World War as a tragic consequence of mistaking artificial divisions for essential ones, an error produced by a crucial misunderstanding of language. From his first book, *The Meaning of Meaning*, published in 1923, to his last lectures in China, he insisted upon the instrumental nature of language, its status as a human tool for structuring perception. Like many intellectuals today, he hoped this insight would lead to a questioning of the limits that language imposes. These linguistic ideas carried over to his project in the Far East. If imperialism depends upon the silence of the colonial subject, Richards's promotion of English was certainly intended to give the silenced a language to speak. He believed that bringing the *Iliad* to China would give access to Western categories of thought manifest in its language. This in turn would allow the Chinese to represent themselves in a Western humanistic discourse from which their culture had been previously excluded. Richards saw this as opening a process of interaction from which Europe and the United States would benefit as well. In *Mencius on the Mind*, the book that resulted from his first trip to China, he discussed techniques for bringing Eastern modes of interpretation to bear on the problems of traditional Western philosophy. Finally, Richards went to China with no notion of an "essential" Orient, different from and inferior to the West. In fact, as we will see, his refusal to acknowledge any fundamental differences in Chinese ways of thinking blinded him to many of the very real cultural and political realities that separated China from Europe. His insistence upon the artificial nature of oppositions such as East and West was in marked contrast to the essentialist divisions that drive the imperial process. Richards's later ideas about the interdependence of categories that present themselves as opposites, partly inspired by his experience in China, in fact has a strong affinity with the postcolonial notion of the hybrid.

And yet his China was to a large extent an imagined East. Richards was not a sinologist, and his efforts to learn Chinese were never more than dilettantish. The elements he found most appealing in the culture—its pacifism, its civility, its taste—bore the distinct marks of Cambridge in the Twenties. It also represented to some degree an escape from intellectual pressures in England. Richards's cultural criticism of the West deeply informed his picture of China; his praise of

its culture and people often betrayed a frustration with developments in Europe and the United States. The sheer size of the country was an attraction, appealing to Richards as a vast field for the application of his linguistic ideas. It seemed a place where modernization might be done "right," with forethought and conscious planning, avoiding the pitfalls that had bedeviled the West. Although the kind of East Richards imagined differed widely from the imperial model, it was to some extent a product of his own desires and interests, and as such it reflects the culture of its time.

The point of this study is not to bring Richards to trial before the bench of contemporary theory. Rather, I want to argue that his ambiguous role in the imperial enterprise complicates our notions of the interaction between culture and empire. What seems to be at stake in the work of postcolonial scholars like Said, Spivak and Bhabha is the possibility of getting outside of oneself, of gaining some critical distance from the patterns of thought by which culture and history shape the individual. As Said writes in *Orientalism*:

> If it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. And to be a European or American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement with the Orient almost since the time of Homer.[19]

If this is true, it leaves little possibility for change. It implies that an enterprise like Richards's, whatever his intentions, was in a sense doomed in advance by a structure of cultural and imperial domination. And yet there must be some way to account for the fact that a figure like Richards was able to see himself as an opponent of imperialism with just as much certainty as a Said or a Bhabha does today. Richards's time in China involves the question whether a critical stance outside a given structure of power or interests is possible for an individual within that culture. The contradictions of his project may thus point to a contradiction in the postcolonial agenda generally, its theories about the power that culture wields outstripping its desire for change. Was Richards then an imperialist or a champion of

cultural hybridity? The answer—an appropriately hybrid one—is both, and in examining his experience in China I hope to show the limits and possibilities that his historical situation provided.

Ultimately, the purpose of this study is not simply to fit Richards to a convenient moral rubric, its points fixed in advance. On the contrary, I began it with the desire to restore some of the nuance and complexity of Britain's imperial relations, a complexity that at times runs the risk of being lost as our understanding of imperialism continues to expand. One consequence of the new appreciation of the role that knowledge and information play in a larger system of colonialist control is that it has become easier to make *a priori* judgments about historical players' perspectives and intentions. As the emphasis in historical studies shifts from individuals to the linguistic and cultural structures that condition them, it becomes tempting to use the wealth of new theoretical models at our disposal as ever more elaborate ways to identify the "bad guys." At its most extreme, the move from intentions to structures can hamper the ability to distinguish in any meaningful sense between, say, an I. A. Richards and a Cecil Rhodes: both ultimately become products (and beneficiaries) of a particular field of power relations in which the key moves are determined in advance of their actions or intentions. I was concerned to see the definition of imperialism grow so broad that *any* attempt to promote one's ideals or reform an apparent injustice might automatically be labeled an act of imperial control, foreclosing a deeper analysis of their actual content. Teaching the British Empire at Stanford confirmed my sense that the current direction in imperial studies, sophisticated as it is at the scholarly level, can translate to students as a license to tar anyone on the British side of the colonial divide with the identical brush. I began to wonder if, armed with our powerful twenty-first-century theoretical tools, useful as they are, we might also be liable to a certain imperialism of our own: a colonization of the past that erases the very real differences in values, identity and belief structures that stand between ourselves and the inhabitants of Britain's imperial centuries. As British studies, particularly in North America, weds itself more closely to the larger story of the empire, it seemed vital to me that story should become infinitely more, not less, complex.

Richards seemed an ideal candidate for testing the limits of contemporary orthodoxies about Britain and its empire. A Cambridge

pacifist and intellectual democrat whose theories depended upon a belief in the liberating powers of individual reason, funded by an American foundation at a time when the United States was stoutly opposed to Britain's imperial ambitions, Richards was worlds away from the kind of jingoistic empire-builders that one generally associates with the colonialist enterprise. Yet as I discussed my research with friends and colleagues, I could see the flags go up when I described Richards's project. Richards's ambitions in China had all the markings of a scheme to reform the world in Britain's linguistic image; my attempts to explain that his enterprise was more intricate and conflicted than it looked from the face of it did little to ally their suspicions. It seemed increasingly important and challenging to understand Richards's ideals from his own point of view as an interested historical actor. Framing the study in this way would not mean forgoing the kind of rigorous critical analysis that historians bring to their sources, but rather applying it to the China that Richards actually saw, or believed he was seeing, rather than the one we might want him to have seen. In this way, I hoped to make sense of some of the apparent contradictions of his project. How did Richards square a desire for world peace with a plan for world English? How could he see himself simultaneously as an apostle of progress and a harbinger of the dangers of Western science? Balance the need he perceived for reform in China with his respect for its cultural splendors? The best answer to these questions seemed to lie in an attentiveness to Richards's own version of his observations, convictions and motives. Accounting for the complexities and obvious tensions inherent in the Basic English "moment" meant recovering the particular angle of vision out of which Richards's hopes for it grew.

To a large extent, the decision to reconstruct the dramatic transformations which occurred in China and the West during the years of Richards's Basic enterprise from the evidence of his diaries, letters and published writings reflects the kind of questions I asked about the way we narrate the history of British imperialism. It also reflects my own limitations. British historians of the future will no doubt read a number of languages in addition to English (many already do) as the history of Britain is increasingly folded into that of the empire which for so long gave it its meaning. I read no Chinese, and speak about as much as my subject did. As a consequence, the enormously important story of Chinese reactions to Richards's efforts, as well as

to those of the Rockefeller Foundation and other Western institutions in China during the tumultuous years between the Ching Dynasty and Mao's Revolution, can only be hinted at here. The excellent work done by scholars like John Israel or Jonathan Spence, both of whose interpretations tremendously enriched my own, offer an account of many of the same events from a Chinese perspective with more depth and expertise than I can provide in this monograph.[20] It is my hope that the present study will contribute to a more complete history of the cross-cultural encounters between China and the West during the modern period.

One great advantage of considering Richards's own construction of events in China is that it helps us to reconstruct an important aspect of Britain's dealings with other cultures, one that holds true across the entire spectrum of imperial relations. Richards's work in China reminds us how easy a matter it was for a Briton in his position to live comfortably within his own conceptions of the East, even when the realities of Chinese life seemed to challenge his ideals. Writers like George Orwell and E. M. Forster have brilliantly exposed the hermetic world of the British club in parts of the empire like Burma and India, an institution whose dull routines and strategic exclusions served to separate the British—physically, socially and, wherever possible, sexually—from the peoples they ruled. The club imposed distance in the face of a potentially dangerous proximity; for Forster and Orwell, it enforced the social cohesion necessary to maintain the divide between sovereign and subject. By analogy, Richards's experience reminds us that the club could exist as a state of mind as well. Richards's distance from some of his colleagues and rivals, judging from the record he left in his diaries and correspondence, was at times remarkable. In part, his remoteness from the realities that threatened Basic's success in China was temperamental. Richards's idealism was unrelenting throughout his career, and he always regarded Basic's fortunes in China as just one part of his wider global vision. As a result, he could be surprisingly indifferent to the personal situation of his various colleagues, both Western and Chinese, often measuring their value in relation to the work they contributed to his Orthological Institute. Victor Purcell, head of the British Protectorate of Chinese in Malaya who traveled with the Richardses during their flight from Peking to Yunnanfu, remembered Richards's unusual aloofness in the face of crisis, rivaled only by that of his student

William Empson, who did math problems to kill time during Japanese bombings along the way.[21]

But Richards's distance also conforms to a broader (and not exclusively British) pattern of removal from regional exigencies that might preclude desired reforms. His experience in China reminds us that the "empire of the mind" was in part a mind-*set* which, however well intentioned, often made it difficult to appreciate local obstacles. Objections to Basic tended to be dismissed as wrongheaded, doubts as inefficiencies, hesitations as a symptom of bureaucratic inertia. While Richards's comments on individual Chinese are remarkably free of cultural stereotyping, and his harshest criticisms of Chinese culture as a whole were most often the result of pique, he also showed little interest in penetrating more deeply into local conditions where doing so threatened to slow his work. I have tried to recapture this particular aspect of his encounter with China by giving to certain colleagues and competitors the narrative weight that Richards accorded them, just as I have retained Richards's spelling of Chinese names. In doing so I hoped to convey something of the air of privileged aloofness which Richards enjoyed as an Englishman abroad.

A word on the sources. Much of the surviving correspondence we owe to Richards's wife, Dorothea. A fascinating figure in her own right who deserves a separate study, she recorded in the pages of the common diary she shared with her husband Ivor invaluable records of meetings, conversations and impressions along with those passages from their letters she felt were of special importance. Where the original document doesn't survive, Dorothea's historical instincts saved many key exchanges for posterity; several of Richards's letters cited here exist in her own writing on the back covers of the diaries and reflect her sense of what was worth remembering. Her editorial hand is a distinct if not always immediate presence in the history that follows.

Richards's story begins at Cambridge University. The inspiration for an international form of English first came to him and Ogden on Armistice Day 1918, as medical students looted Ogden's shop for his outspoken criticism of the war. The First World War and its effect on Britain's cultural life form the context for Richards's thinking about language and culture. Chapter 2 details the importance of this period in shaping the ideas that he later brought to China. Richards's literary theory and cultural critique during his time at Cambridge deeply in-

formed his project in the East, while earlier Cambridge commentators on China such as Bertrand Russell and Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson influenced his own sense of the possibilities for China's future. Chapter 3 examines Richards's first year at Tsing Hua, analyzing the reasons for his attraction to life in China and considering some of the difficulties in communication he encountered there. Chapter 4 provides an account of Basic English and Richards's growing hopes for its application in China. He returned to Peking in 1936 with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation. The activities and agenda of this institution, and its motives for funding a Basic English program in China, is crucial to understanding Richards's successes in the following year. Chapter 5 describes the events leading to the foundation of the Orthological Institute of China in 1936, the main organ of the Basic movement, and outlines its initial reception in China, culminating in the Chinese Ministry of Education's offer to help draft a revised national curriculum that would include Basic English.

Chapter 6 concerns the fate of the Orthological Institute during the war years. Despite the Japanese invasion, Richards and his colleagues continued their work in China under increasingly difficult circumstances with the hope that Basic would be useful in peacetime. I chart the changing fortune of Basic through the vicissitudes of war, exile and political unrest, tracing the local events and broader historical circumstances that gave it shape. The growing politicization of English in China during the final years of the war changed the nature of Richards's project and pointed the way for the obstacles Basic would encounter during the Cold War. Richards's penultimate visit to China in 1950 forms the subject of Chapter 7. Following the recent Communist victory over the Nationalists, his three-month stay in Peking allowed him to assess the relative merits of the new regime and its prospects for the nation's future. It was on this visit that he witnessed the Chinese reaction to the outbreak of the Korean War, and began to realize the obstacles that the Cold War would present to an international project like Basic. Chapter 8 offers a brief account of Richards's last visit to China in 1979 and a final assessment of his Far Eastern career.

The story of Richards's time in Asia involves some of the major developments of the twentieth century. The period of his engagement with China was a volatile one in both Europe and the Far East. When Richards first arrived in Peking, northern warlords were fighting in

territorial skirmishes reminiscent of Confucius's time. Fifty years later, he came at the invitation of a Communist government to signal the re-opening of relations with the West after the Cultural Revolution. In the years between, through war, occupation and political instability, China made the first crucial steps from a traditional agrarian society to a major world power. Britain's role also changed dramatically over this period. Before the First World War, the British held an empire and still dominated an increasingly competitive world economy. By 1950, the year of Richards's voyage to Communist China, Britain had relinquished much of its former empire and ceded economic preeminence to the United States. Richards's career involved him to varying degrees in the affairs of China, Britain and the United States, and the account of his experience in the Far East includes the history of this global transformation as well. Aside from the published works of Richards and his colleagues, my primary sources are Richards's diaries and correspondence, located at Magdalene College, Cambridge University, and the reports and correspondence available at the Rockefeller Foundation archives in North Tarrytown, New York. Because of Richards's distaste for biography, this study is among the first to make a thorough use of Richards's diaries in accounting for his motives and activities in China.

"If the Empires of the future are the empires of the Mind, I know who's going to win through." Richards's assessment of the Communist regime applies to his own project as well. It captures something of the ambivalent nature of his work in China, expressing his belief in pacifism and the powers of persuasion, the necessity of communicating and convincing, but also his desire to influence, change minds, institute the ideals and values of his culture. If Basic in the end didn't "win through," Richards was surely right in seeing the empire of the future as one of minds, growing exponentially as new information technologies expand the parameters of cultural influence and exchange. The study of Richards's time in China is thus a rich starting-point for understanding the postcolonial complexities of our own.

2 The Cambridge Background

I

I. A. Richards was arguably the most influential literary critic of the 1920's. Along with T. S. Eliot, whose critical essays began to appear in the same decade, Richards's writings helped to define a new sensibility in the years following the First World War. In his memoir *Lions and Shadows,* Christopher Isherwood gives a vivid picture of Richards's impact on the age. Describing the effect of his lectures upon students like himself at Cambridge in 1926, Isherwood writes:

> To us, he was infinitely more than a brilliant new literary critic: he was our guide, our evangelist, who revealed to us, in a succession of astounding lighting flashes, the entire expanse of the Modern World. Up to this moment, we had been . . . romantic conservatives, devil-worshippers, votaries of "Beauty" and "Vice," Manicheans, would-be Kropotkin anarchists, who refused to read T. S. Eliot . . . or the newspapers, or Freud. Now, in a moment, all was changed. Poets, ordered Mr. Richards, were to reflect aspects of the World-Picture. Poetry wasn't a flame, a firebird from the moon; it was a group of interrelated stimuli acting upon the oracular nerves, the semi-circular canals, the brain, the solar plexus, the digestive and sexual organs. It did you medically demonstrable good, like a dose of strychnine or salts. We became behaviourists, materialists, atheists. In our conversation, we substituted the word "emotive" for the word beautiful; we learnt to condemn inferior work as a "failure in communication"; or more crushing still, as "a private poem." We talked excitedly about the "phantom aesthetic state."
>
> But if Mr. Richards enormously stimulated us, he plunged us, also, into the profoundest gloom. It seemed to us that everything we had valued would have to be scrapped. . . . We were banished from that world forever.[1]

Isherwood's account highlights some of the more salient qualities of Richards's work in the 1920's: its anti-aestheticism, its emphasis on

art as communication, its recourse to scientific, even physiological, explanations of artistic response. Above all, Isherwood captures the almost missionary fervor of Richards's essays at the time. His brand of Modernism seemed more than a new aesthetic; it involved a kind of ethical conversion, a rejection of traditional literary terms and values in favor of a world-view in which poetry played an active, therapeutic role. This chapter will examine how Richards's style of literary criticism, developed in the atmosphere of interwar Cambridge, led to the enterprise in China.

Richards's thought has been closely evaluated and criticized in several other studies.[2] How his poetics connect with his work in China has been less carefully considered. In a 1990 review in the Times Literary Supplement, Jonathan Culler observed: "There are thus, in Richards's career, two stories: the account of what he achieved in literary studies, which calls for critical evaluation, and the tale of the activities that took him away from literary criticism."[3] The problem with Culler's assessment is that it overlooks the ties between Richards's literary ideas and his Far Eastern experience. By separating his criticism from his Basic work, Culler's division ignores the underlying relationship between Richards's literary, cultural and international activities. To what extent did Richards's poetics inspire his work in China? Why did his linguistic interests lead to a program for global English? How did his literary theories evolve into concerns with modernization abroad? In short, what are the connections between Richards's literary and political activities?

In approaching these questions, this chapter examines three aspects of Richards's experience at Cambridge in the 1920's. The first section considers his ideas about language and literature from the publication of *The Meaning of Meaning* in 1922 to *Practical Criticism* in 1929—the last book he wrote before his first extended visit to China. A close examination of Richards's writings over this period indicates that his interest in the Far East did not represent a break with his critical career, but rather formed a logical extension of his literary theories. In its stress on communication, readers' responses and the salvific effects of literature, his work in the 1920's anticipates his later concerns with the teaching of English in China.

The second section describes the historical context of Richards's criticism, charting the impact of the First World War and the cultural changes that followed in its wake upon his unique understanding of

the relationship between language, literature and culture. Linking Richards's views on modernity to his work in China is his ambivalence about a rising consumer culture and the growing prestige of science. China came to represent for Richards an alternative to the excesses of Western "progress" that he identified in his critical writings of the Twenties, and these concerns strongly colored his perception of the East.

Finally, Richards's picture of China was deeply informed by the particular ideals and values current at Cambridge during his time there. To describe the importance of this background to his understanding of the Far East, the final section examines two other influential Cambridge figures whose interests in China anticipated Richards's own. Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, whose writings were a strong influence on Richards as an undergraduate, had a lifelong fascination with China. His *Letters from John Chinaman*, written in 1900 before Lowes Dickinson had visited the country, was a critique of the West written from the perspective of a Chinese observer. In it he expressed many of the values that shaped Richards's own cultural criticism and contributed to his picture of China. Bertrand Russell, a member with Richards of the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club and a friend with the inventor of Basic English, C. K. Ogden, also wrote famously about China following his year-long stay in the country in 1920. Russell's analysis of the virtues and defects of Chinese society in *The Problem of China*, published in 1922, reveals many of the assumptions that Richards would bring to his later interpretation of the East. Lowes Dickinson's and Russell's pacifism, aestheticism and faith in progress defined a distinctly Cambridge-inflected vision of China. An appreciation of this background is crucial for understanding how Richards's literary work at Cambridge relates to his later engagement with China. The transition from Isherwood's Modern "evangelist" to a prophet of English in China was thus in no way an abandonment of Richards's earlier literary concerns, but rather their extension into the realm of global politics. As such, his career represents one of the most significant attempts in the twentieth century to bridge the gap between literature and action, to transform the politics of theory into a pragmatic theory of political action.

II

I. A. Richards was not the first to address wider social and cultural concerns through literary criticism. In rejecting the formalist aesthetic of his day, he was returning to the tradition of Victorian critics like John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold whose writings embraced a wide range of moral and political issues. In fact, it is more often with these Victorian critics than with his Modernist contemporaries that Richards is now identified. As John Paul Russo points out, "the fact that Richards invents his own system and language to convey certain mid-Victorian values should not conceal his deep indebtedness [to those values]."[4] Pamela McCallum credits Richards, along with T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, with "the reinvention of Arnoldian intellectual and moral dimension within literary criticism."[5] More recently, Steven Heath finds Richards "directly echoing Matthew Arnold" in his notion of literature as a modern substitute for religion.[6] But if Richards echoed the substance of Arnold's criticism, he applied it to the concerns of a distinctly different age. In responding to the particular cultural environment of interwar Britain, he developed a theory of literary value that would inform his Basic work in the Far East over the next decades.

In evaluating Richards's work in the Twenties, three themes stand out as particularly relevant to his later activities in China. The first is his insistence upon poetry as, above all, a means of communication. In approaching literature as an instrument for transmitting emotions rather than an occasion for aesthetic rapture, Richards was responding to the emergent linguistic philosophy at Cambridge pioneered by G. E. Moore, a significant influence upon his Bloomsbury contemporaries as well. Richards's emphasis on literature as communication, developed in part through his contact with Moore, forms a bridge between his literary and Basic work. A second theme in his early criticism is the stress upon poetry as everyday experience. Breaking with Paterian ideas of an elevated aesthetic state, Richards reclaimed poetry as a psychological event that, in Isherwood's phrase, "did you demonstrably medical good." This insistence upon poetry's relevance to contemporary social and technological transformations helps to explain Richards's eagerness to put his critical ideas at the service of a more concrete form of action in the Far East. Finally, Richards conceived of poetry as a type of mental training that could equip its

"*Empires of the Mind* presents original, stimulating, and ground-breaking research that examines not only I. A. Richards as a linguistic thinker and social critic, but East-West politics, ethnocentric and racial stereotyping, and the history of Chinese studies and Chinese representations in the English language cultural tradition." —*John Paul Russo, University of Miami*

"Telling the fascinating and somewhat improbable tale of I. A. Richards's efforts to persuade the Chinese to adopt Basic English, Rodney Koeneke has given us a magnificent book, written with the insight of a poet and the documentation of a historian. Richards was pursuing a generous vision that would, he thought, combine Eastern and Western virtues. Many of our most compelling present concerns—the ramifications of imperialism, and its uneasy legacy, the role of culture, modernization, post-colonialism, and the linguistic turn—are richly illuminated by this path-breaking study. Of the historians of his generation, Koeneke is among the very best." —*Peter Stansky, Stanford University*

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
www.sup.org

ISBN 0-8047-4822-5