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Rethinking Chinese Modernities

The question of Chinese modernity is undoubtedly complex. For scholars who draw on traditional western markers of modernity–Enlightenment, rationality, movement towards a democratic public sphere–the long decline of feudal regimes seems to block China's emergence into modernity until the 1920s. Even then the persistence of a huge peasant population, many living in earth-scrapping poverty, a relative lack of industrial development, feudal landholding, and remnants of late imperial bureaucracy could be cited to characterize China as a nation caught between feudalism and modernity. Complicating the question of Chinese modernity still further is difficulty of periodization: is the inception of China's emergence into modernity to be located in the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the Republican period? In the 1940s and the founding of the People's Republic? Or, in the 1980s economic reforms that opened China to a western-style market economy?

Viewed from a wider perspective, these kinds of questions make it obvious that a common assumption all too often underlies discussions of Chinese modernity. The histories of western democracies are opposed to a premodern "non-west," an assumption underpinned by the idea that the west offers the only template for modernity. In *Embodied Modernities*, editors Fran Martin and Larissa Heinrich question this conventional opposition, situating the collection in the tradition of scholarship on non-western modernities that has developed in the past decade. Scholars such as Arjun Appadurai, Aihwa Ong, Lisa Rofel, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, Lydia Liu and others have produced an innovative body of work that argues modernity cannot merely be seen as the universalizing of western Enlightenment values, but must also be understood as, "manifest in distinct syncretic formations across the diverse non-western sites of colonial and postcolonial encounters" (p. 9). An influential book for Martin and Heinrich is Leo Ou-fan Lee's study of mid-twentieth-century Chinese urban culture, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China 1930-1945* (1999). Drawing on the methodologies of contemporary cultural studies, Lee moves away from the traditional focus of studies of the May Fourth period that tended to examine the elite cultures of philosophy, art, and literature. Lee focuses instead on more popular cultural phenomena–fashion, graphic arts, film, periodicals, journals–to produce a study of "Shanghai modern" during the Republican period. Like Lee, the authors of the articles in *Embodied Modernities* explore representations from popular culture: actors in Beijing opera, martial arts fiction, contemporary film from China and Hong Kong, Taiwanese Lesbian fiction, Bruce Lee's "warrior" body, the style of female politicians. In this way, Martin and Heinrich are interested in examining peripheral or alternative Chinese modernities from various moments in the twentieth century, moving from the Republication period to the contemporary "transnational cultural flow and the hybrid character of Chinese modernities" (p. 10).

Another central focus of the collection is the figuration of the body and the diverse ways in which modernities find representation through the body. Because the body is the sensory ground of human experience it is a crucial site where the transformations of the modern are lived out. As Heinrich and Martin write, "the body is experientially central to individual, quotidian experience of modernity" (p. 11), and offers an insightful space for analysis of a wide range of cultural modulations throughout the twentieth century: "the translation of scientific discourses on anatomy, medicine, gender, and sexuality; the implementation of a Maoist vision of the collective body of Chinese socialism, and the articulation of transforming discourses on the modern Chinese nation and cultural identity allegorized as body representations (for example, the notorious 'sick man of Asia' in the early twentieth century, or the spectacularly anticolonial figure of the late-twentieth-century Hong Kong action star, Bruce Lee)" (p. 11). In this sense, *Embodied Moderni-*

ties is especially useful in its willingness to move beyond politics, high culture, and history–the more conventional markers of modernity. Such a movement away from the grand narratives of Chinese modernity permits the articles in the book to examine the excluded others (pp. 12-13) of dominant histories.

In the first chapter, "Bound to be Represented," Angela Zito analyzes the campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries against footbinding. Zito is interested not so much in the histories of footbinding as in the construction of Chinese women within the discourses of the opposition to the practice. Protests against footbinding were popular with western women missionaries, and modernist Chinese intellectuals also incorporated anti-footbinding stances in emergent nationalist republican discourses that contrasted the freedom of western women with the backwardness of Chinese women. What Zito emphasizes is the construction of the Chinese woman within an implicit equation of third world=victim=woman (p. 33), through which "woman" is reduced to her body's deformations. On the one hand, the bound foot becomes fetishized, and on the other, issues of religion, class, economics, and politics are displaced into a concentration on the female body (p. 35). The chapter adeptly demonstrates how the protests against footbinding have wide-reaching implications for the representation of women's bodies.

Other chapters on the republican period take up the shifting of gender in cross-dressing. Beginning with Ba Jin's novel *Jia*(completed 1931), Cuncun Wu and Mark Stevenson examine the suppression of male same-sex prostitution in Beijing near the beginning of the twentieth century. They show how the more expansive sexuality in the late feudal period is restructured within a western sociological/medical opposition of deviancy vs. normality. In "Cross-Dressed Nation," John Zhou analyzes the extensive influence on style and fashion of Mei Lanfang, the celebrated Beijing opera actor (*dan*) who played female roles. Tze-Lan D. Sang discusses the transgendered body in Wang Dulu's serialized novel, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*(1941-1942), which will undoubtedly be familiar to most readers from Ang Lee's film version (2000). Sang points out, however, that in the film adaptation the main character Jiaolong, the young lady in a wealthy household who is secretly an accomplished martial artist, is portrayed within a defined female heterosexual position. In contrast, the serialized novel presents gender as fluid and ambiguous: Jiaolong is "neither male nor female" and "half male and half female" (p. 99). Sang goes on to suggest that an analysis of gender in Wang's narrative is particularly important because it suggests how popular "taste and desires may have resisted the heteronormative vision of the modernizing elite" (p. 109). In this way, the novel draws on "another strand of nationalistic discourse that encouraged female masculinity" (p. 109) within Chinese modernity which has subsequently been marginalized by the conventional gender divisions of the May Fourth elite. Like Leo Ou-fan Lee's study of 1930s Shanghai, Sang's analyses offer an insightful retrieval of a popular culture text.

Part 2 investigates representations of the body in post-1949 Chinese culture, and, not unexpectedly, several of the chapters are focused on analyzing film. Chris Berry explores the constructions of masculinity in Bruce Lee's globally popular martial arts films; Olivia Khoo mobilizes Jacques Derrida's spectral aesthetics to analyze *In the Mood for Love* (2000) by the Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai; Jami Proctor-Xu examines the transformation of urban sites and the spaces of everyday life in Zhang Yang's *Shower* (1999), a film that narrates the story of a group of elderly Beijingers whose traditional housing is being demolished and replaced by new high-rise apartments. Proctor-Xu perceptively shows how the discourse of the film situates urban housing within a naturalist model where the buildings are presented as having completed their life-cycle. The transformation of the neighborhood is represented as, in Proctor-Xu's words, "part of the natural course of human history and the evolution of lived space, in which everything faces death and possible extinction" (p. 167). The film, therefore, can be read as legitimating the destruction of urban spaces that is constantly transforming Beijing. This reading of the film is compelling, but it would also be intriguing to explore the tensions between the western predilection to preserve older buildings and the Chinese acceptance of change. To cite only one example–the Beijing artist Wang Jiansong has created an installation artwork, "One Hundred Signs of Demolition (Or One Hundred Characters of 'Chai' 1999)," made up of photographs of the circled character *chai* (demolish, dismantle) painted on buildings throughout Beijing. Wang situates his attraction to the character on the walls of Beijing within the Chinese proverb, "out with the old, in with the new." And yet, he also speaks of feeling ambivalence: "the act of demolition seems to be a dividing line between two opposite actions: destruction and construction."[1] The installation, through its repetition of the character, together with a richness of individual variations in color and inscription, captures this tension.

The chapter by co-editor Larissa Heinrich, "Souvenirs of the Organ Trade," investigates contemporary experi-

mental art and installations. Peng Dongui's photomontage, "Group Photo No. 1-3," (1999) which could also be translated as "Group Souvenir No. 1-3" (pp. 135-137), represents three bodies in a visual montage of partial faces, torsos, and legs so that the viewers are frustrated in any attempt to restore wholeness or assign gender to a body. A face that appears male is joined to hands that appear to be female and to indeterminate legs in jeans. It is a both an effective questioning of the body's autonomy and a fascinating glimpse of an imagined collectivity. Another striking work discussed by Heinrich is a performance piece by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu: "Link of the Body" or "Connected Bodies" (2000). The two artists transfused their blood into a medical specimen of conjoined twins. In the photograph documenting the performance, the two artists, one on each side, sit behind the twins; medical tubing runs from the artists' arms to the twins' mouths. As Heinrich points out, the performance raises issues about the market traffic in body parts, whether the spread of HIV-AIDS and hepatitis C through the selling of blood by desperately poor people or the international "medical tourism" of those seeking organ transplants (p. 143). Both of these artworks were part of the 2000 "Uncooperative Approach" exhibit (*Bu hezuo fangshi*), which was presented as a counter-exhibition to the now-established (and establishment) Shanghai Biennale. These artworks, therefore, deliberately situate themselves on the margins of internationally accepted contemporary Chinese art, refusing to co-operate with the penetration of the global market into art practices.

*Embodied Modernities*opens up a welcome discussion of very diverse representations in Chinese modernity. Readers who are not familiar with Chinese modernity will find the book a challenging and useful introduction. Readers who are aware of more traditional accounts of Chinese modernity centering around the Republican period and the May Fourth literary and cultural movements will discover an alternative perspective on modernity. Specialists in twentieth-century Chinese cultural studies will find perceptive analyses in the chapters of the book. *Embodied Modernities* deserves to be widely read.

Note

[1]. Huang Du, ed. *Post-Material: Interpretations of Everyday Life by Contemporary Chinese Artists*, trans. Wang Yiyou and Bing Yi (Beijing: World Chinese Arts Publication Co. Ltd., 2000), 63.

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