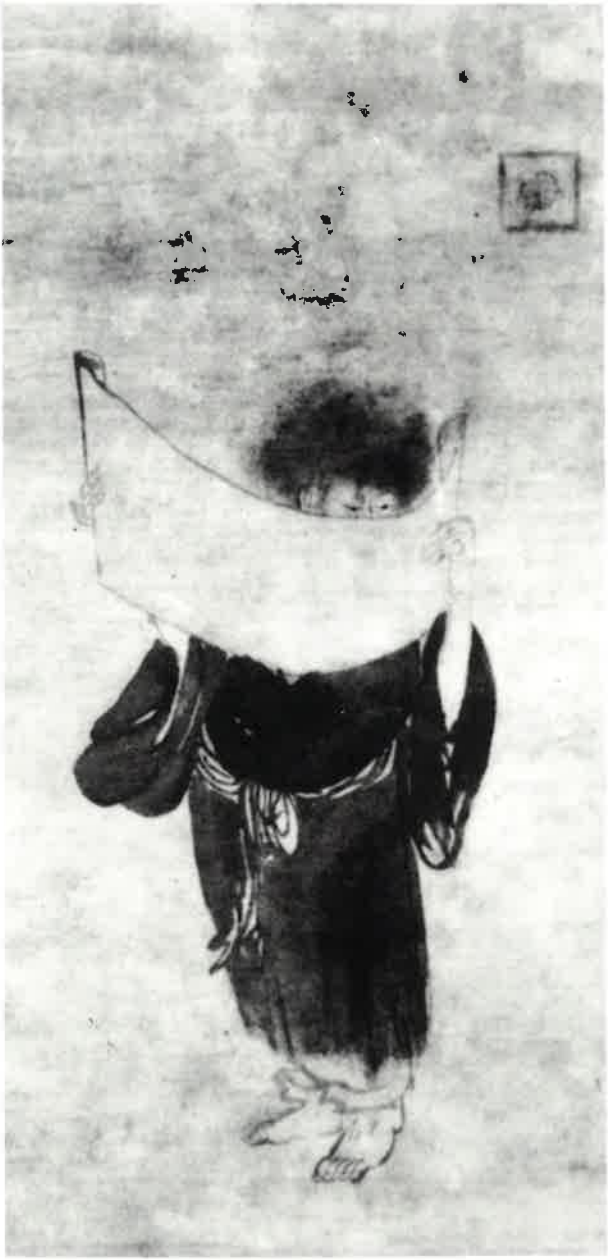
Cross-Cultural Readings of Chineseness

Narratives, Images, and Interpretations of the 1990s



EDITED BY
Wen-hsin Yeh

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Correspondence and manuscripts may be sent to:
Ms. Joanne Sandstrom, Managing Editor
Institute of East Asian Studies
University of California
Berkeley, California 94720-2318
E-mail: easia@uclink.berkeley.edu

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Contents

Acknowledgments

The chapters collected here were first presented at a workshop held at the Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, Berkeley, in January 1998. On that occasion Rey Chow, Stan Abe, and Michelle Yeh each gave a paper, with Wendy Larson, Patricia Berger, and Haun Saussy serving as discussants respectively. By the invitation of the editor, the commentators later developed their remarks into essays, while the presenters further revised their papers.

The contributors would like to thank all who participated at the Center for Chinese Studies workshop on that occasion. It was the questions and comments from the audience that inspired the production of this volume.

Introduction

The six essays in this volume offer interpretive readings of a film, a work of plastic art, and an essay, all products of contemporary China. The film examined here is Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon,* the art *A Book from the Sky* by Xu Bing, and the essay Zheng Min's "Retrospect at the End of the Century: Chinese Language Reform and Modern Chinese Poetry." Chen has been a notable figure in the limelight of international film circles for more than a decade. Xu's accomplishment received recognition, most recently, in the form of a MacArthur "genius award." Zheng Min's essay did not appear in journals such as the *New York Review of Books,* but it is larded with quotations from Lacan and Derrida. These works are thus "Chinese" not just because they are by Chinese artists and writers and "from China" but because they also bear witness to cultural and intellectual imaginations both by the Chinese themselves and about China in an era of border-crossing. They constitute, in that sense, part and parcel of an interactive reconstruction of the meaning of "Chineseness" in our time.

The locus of this volume is thus not somewhere "inside China" in its territorially bounded convention, but a Chinese world that is being refashioned by its global reach. The interpretive readings are not directed at objects "out there"—museum pieces and cultural relics of discrete and delimited significance. They are examples, instead, of the possibilities of textual meanings produced through divergent practices of reading. The three sets of essays in this volume combine to show how a text can be made to yield opposing dimensions with the choice of particular strategies of reading.

What, for instance, does a Western audience see in a Chinese film or piece of art when the viewing takes place in the West? If—as is often the case—the "Chineseness" of the work inevitably surfaces as a predominant question, does this not demand of the work a certain ethnic attribute that reconstitutes its nature? What,

similarly, does a Chinese audience see when the viewing takes place in China? Given the Chinese preoccupation with China's place in the world, in what way do questions of identity surface in Chinese viewing, reconstituting a piece of work that is known to have been well received as authentically "Chinese" in the West?

Rey Chow's essay, "The Seductions of Homecoming: Place, Authenticity, and Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon*," sets the tone of this volume by posing as a problem the quest for authenticity in the search for "Chineseness" in a transnational setting. The essay offers a reading of the film that is focused on Zhongliang, an orphaned boy who becomes almost a son to Dada, the leader of a Shanghai gang. Zhongliang's story is that of a runaway from a stultifying hierarchical order, who finds his niche in Dada's underground family as the prized seducer of married women. Zhongliang's initiation to desire, to be sure, precedes Shanghai and takes place in the presence of his sister for the perverted pleasure of his brother-in-law. The urban sojourning is instrumental to his transformation from a vulnerable victim to a skilled gigolo. Rey Chow's interpretive reading moves to a new plane when the accomplished seducer heads home on the assignment of Dada to prey upon Ruyi, the virgin sister of Zhongliang's brother-in-law and the new head of the Pang clan.

By focusing on Zhongliang, Rey Chow both draws attention to the gendered dynamics between males on the run and females who are place-bound and offers a reading of *Temptress Moon* as a psychodrama of encounters between men and women. In Chow's reading, the multiple acts of entries and departures in the film mark critical transitions in a narrative about human desire rather than Chinese identity. This tale of desire, to be sure, involves subjects and objects mutually positioned in a patriarchal framework. The power relationships within this framework are radically transformed by the spatial displacement engendered by the lead characters' lateral movements between the Pang ancestral estate and Dada's Shanghai gangland. Zhongliang's journey alters his standing vis-à-vis Ruyi and enhances his ability to seduce upon homecoming. Rey Chow's interpretive reading thus foregrounds the spatial and the universal over the historical and the particular and offers a reading that is about placement and seduction instead of place and identity.

Wendy Larson's essay, written in response to Rey Chow's piece, offers an alternative reading that presents *Temptress Moon* as a tale of power. Larson follows the progression of Duanwu

ONE

The Seductions of Homecoming: Place, Authenticity, and Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon*

REY CHOW

> That sentiment accompanying the absence of home—homesickness—can cut two ways: it can be a yearning for the authentic home (situated in the past or in the future) or it can be the recognition of the inauthenticity of all homes.
>
> — Rosemary Marangoly George (75)

Even though it has been an overwhelmingly successful phenomenon worldwide, contemporary Chinese cinema is often greeted by Chinese-speaking audiences with hostility. It is as if the accomplishments of this cinema have an impossible task in returning home. The simple fact that it has traveled abroad and been gazed at with interest by "foreigners" is apparently enough to cause it to lose trustworthiness as wholly and genuinely Chinese. The films of the two most well-known directors, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, for instance, have continued to be attacked for their tendencies to pander to the tastes of Western audiences eager for the orientalized, exotic images of a China

Note: This essay, which first appeared in *Narrative* 6.1 (January 1998): 1–17, is based on the version of the film *Temptress Moon* I saw in Hong Kong in the summer of 1996. Unfortunately, some of the scenes have been edited and cut from the North American version. (Places that contain discrepancies between the Asian and North American versions are marked by asterisks.) The essay was first presented as a plenary speech at the annual conference of the journal *Narrative*, at the University of Florida, Gainesville, April 1997. My sincere thanks to Elizabeth Langland not only for inviting me to speak but also for negotiating with Miramax for a showing of *Temptress Moon* at the conference, which thus became the U.S. premiere of the film. (It was released to the general public a couple of months later.) I am also grateful to Lee Edelman, my discussant, for his profoundly responsive comments, and to the audience at Gainesville for their enthusiasm. Used by permission.

TWO

Duanwu Goes Home: Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon* and the Politics of Homecoming

WENDY LARSON

The act of returning home is a central narrative theme in modern Chinese literature. In story after story of the May Fourth period, authors represent homecoming in different ways, but they always situate it as a contradictory and unsettling event in the establishment and construction of Chinese modernity. To return home means negotiation with the Chinese past, both that still existing within the present and that within the narrator's oft idealized memory. In this internalized past, the narrator experiences homecoming as a psychological crisis. In this essay I interpret the meaning of homecoming in Chen Kaige's 1997 film *Fengyue* (Temptress moon) and use the film to look back at homecoming within May Fourth enlightenment thought as it is expressed in Lu Xun's seminal stories "Guxiang" (My old home) and "Zhufu" (New year's sacrifice). I argue that in *Temptress Moon,* Chen continues a long discourse on homecoming and through the character of Duanwu, takes on, responds to, and deconstructs the May Fourth enlightenment narrative.[1] Duanwu provides a new

[1] This paper originated as a commentary on Rey Chow's article "The Seductions of Homecoming: Place, Authenticity, and Chen Kaige's *Temptress Moon*," which is included in this volume. My debt to her argument, which shows how the theme of coming home again, presented vividly in the return of the character Zhongliang to the Pang residence in the countryside, is parallel to a structure implicit in the act of filmmaking, should be obvious. As part of my original comments, I used other publications by Rey for comparison and contrast. I have maintained those sections in this paper when they shed light on the character of Duanwu. I thank Rey for her work and for encouraging me to write a paper focusing on Duanwu's role in the film.

THREE

Reading the Sky

STANLEY K. ABE

The following is an expanded version of an essay already submitted for publication at the time of the Berkeley workshop and distributed to the other speakers and discussants.[1] Rather than attempting to rewrite the original essay, I have made revisions and insertions, many inspired by the workshop. It should be noted that the essay opens with a Berkeley connection in that it involves Yang Buwei, the wife of Chao Yuen Ren, the noted linguist who taught for many years in the Department of Oriental Languages.

I

In his book *Brushes with Power*, Richard Kraus tells the story of Yang Buwei, the first female doctor of Western medicine in China, who as a child was unable to complete an examination essay that was to begin with the words, "Women are the mothers of the

I am grateful to the Center for Chinese Studies and Wen-hsin Yeh for the opportunity to present this material and to all of the participants, especially Rey Chow, for their comments and support. Parts of the essay were presented at the College Art Association Annual Meeting, Boston, February, 1996 (thanks to Richard Powell), and the "Gender, Visuality, Modernity in Twentieth-Century China" workshop, University of Pittsburgh, September 1997 (thanks to Kathy Linduff and Sheldon Lu). The original essay benefited from the comments of Kristine Stiles, Terry Smith, and Margaret Hattori. Jonathan Arac changed the shape of the essay by raising challenging questions regarding aesthetics, the sublime, and the work of art as "critical." A fortuitous meeting with Marie Aquilino introduced me to Louis Marin's *Utopics*. Special thanks to Yue Gang for urging me to open a space for the utopian in my reading of *A Book from the Sky*. The writing of this essay would not have been possible without the cooperation of Xu Bing as well as Amy Vanderhill, Massachusetts College of Art, and Zheng Hu, University Art Museum, Albany.

[1] The original essay, titled "No Questions, No Answers: 'China' and *A Book from the Sky*," was published in *boundary* 2 25, 3 (Fall 1998): 169–92.

FOUR

Pun Intended: A Response to Stanley Abe, "Reading the Sky"

PATRICIA BERGER

> I never thought that [my Nonsense Writing] would also get entangled within [this literary process], making a quite simple point chaotic, obscure, and troublesome.[1]
>
> Xu Bing, 1991

Xu Bing's *Tian shu,* as Stanley Abe explains in his "Reading the Sky," is an ever-changing monumental installation of bound and unfurled pages printed with more than 4,000 meaningless characters[2] invented by the artist himself and arranged into a visually convincing, but unreadable, traditional format of text and commentary. A work conceived as an alternative to traditional language, as a piece of antiverbiage, *Tian shu* has ironically generated more artspeak than any other single work of contemporary Chinese art, both in China and in the United States (most prominently in *Public Culture,* but also in *Art News,* the Chicago-based *New Art Examiner,* and elsewhere).

Abe, however, notably shifts the focus of previous criticism to take a look at the remarkable reception in the West of Xu Bing's *Tian shu* since the artist's move here in 1990. Beginning with Xu's first solo exhibition in the United States in 1991–92,[3] American commentary has been directed at the intentional unintelligibility of

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[1] Wu Hung, "A 'Ghost Rebellion': Notes on Xu Bing's 'Nonsense Writing' and Other Works," *Public Culture* 6 (1994): 414.

[2] Xu Bing has said he created 4,000 characters "because Chinese government publications often use about 4,000 words. This is the number of commonly used words in Chinese newspapers and official texts." See Christina Davidson, "Word from Heaven," *Art and Asia Pacific* 1, 2 (1994): 48–55.

[3] At the Elvehjem Museum, University of Wisconsin, *Tian shu* was first shown together with *Ghosts Pounding a Wall* and *Five Series of Repetitions.*

FIVE

Chinese Postmodernism and the Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Poetry

MICHELLE YEH

If we were to choose one word to describe modern Chinese poetry, it would have to be "revolution." Modern Chinese poetry is an aesthetic revolution in the full sense of the word, encompassing all poetic conventions, including form, prosody, subject matter, and, above all, language. The advocacy of the modern vernacular to replace the literary classical Chinese struck the fatal blow to the formidable, seemingly indestructible edifice of traditional poetry. The use of the vernacular also distinguishes the literary revolution of 1917 from its predecessor in the late Qing known as the "revolution in the poetic realm" (*shijie geming*), led by Huang Zunxian, Xia Zengyou, and Tan Sitong. Although Hu Shi did not actually use "revolution" (*geming*) in the published version of "A Preliminary Proposal for Literary Reform" (Wenxue gailiang chuyi), generally regarded as the first manifesto of modern Chinese poetry, the word was in fact used in the drafts and appeared frequently both before and after January 1917,[1] not to mention the equally famous battle cry raised by Chen Duxiu: "On Literary Revolution" (Wenxue geming lun).

My sincere thanks to Rey Chow for her helpful comments and to the audience at the Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

[1] See relevant writings collected in Hu Shi, *Hu Shi shihua* (Discourses on poetry by Hu Shi) (Chengdu: Sichuan wenyi chubanshe, 1991).

SIX

Postmodernism in China: A Sketch and Some Queries

HAUN SAUSSY

The various "posts" that have attracted so much attention in China lately—principally postmodernism (*houxiandai zhuyi*) and postcolonialism (*houzhimin zhuyi*), and in an idiomatic sense poststructuralism (*houjiegou zhuyi*), or as the Chinese authors conveniently call them for short, postlearning (*houxue*)—look like translations into modern Chinese idiom of terms and ideas pioneered elsewhere. But I mean by that no more than "look like." The key to making sense of them, I think, is to discard the hope that understanding them, and above all judging them, can be accomplished by reference to a more familiar "original" postmodernism. What more uncomfortable paradox can be imagined than attempting to argue that one's own postmodernism is the real, the authentic, the historically originary, the ancestrally legitimate brand? Rather than fall into the trap of saying that the Chinese post-ists have got it wrong, and trying to put them right by a more heavily supported reading of Derrida or Foucault or Lyotard, let us ask what the appropriate frame of reference for understanding Chinese post-ism is.

Because contemporary Chinese literature is not my main interest, I have relied on friends and colleagues for guidance through the dense bibliography on these questions. My biggest debts are to Zhang Kuan (who knew that I would disagree with him but generously supplied information nonetheless), Wang Youqin, and Guan Qi. I also thank Wen-hsin Yeh for inviting me to look into these issues. Errors of fact and judgment can be lodged securely with me. For two stimulating surveys of the questions discussed here, see Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, "Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China," *New Literary History* 28 (1997): 111–33; Zhang Xudong, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), especially "On Some Motifs in the Cultural Discussion," 71–99.