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Claire Conceison. *Significant Other: Staging the American in China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. xi, 297 pp. 15 illus. Hardcover \$55.00, ISBN 0-8248-2653-1.

Popular historian Jonathan Spence's observation of Western fascination with China that "has remained primed over the centuries" applies equally well to ongoing twentieth-century Chinese engagement with all things Western in a wide range of sentiments: fascination, resistance, ambivalent love, and hate.¹ With China's post-1990 reemergence in world economies and its attendant anxieties, a host of "China" questions return in multifaceted forms to scholarly inquiries, including one of the most important questions that *Significant Other* addresses: how are China's self-image and knowledge of China's cultural Others produced, authorized, and circulated in the People's Republic?

Asian cultural production has frequently been used as an example to sustain or dispute claims about globalization, Orientalism, and Occidentalism. Claire Conceison's study of contemporary theater in China reframes this debate by problematizing modes of intercultural encounters—in both theatrical representations and academic endeavors to study them. Itself a pathbreaking project, as evidenced by its theoretical framework and selection of a group of understudied plays, *Significant Other* builds upon and engages such pioneering scholarship as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) and Xiaomei Chen's *Occidentalism* (1995; 2nd ed., 2002).

To examine the imaginaries of the Chinese Self and its "significant Other"—the American—Conceison has chosen a significant but marginalized subject matter: Chinese *huaju* (spoken drama). More so than other forms of cultural production, theater—as a public event and entertainment—provides a venue where cross-cultural negotiations are physicalized on stage in front of audiences who not only witness but also participate in these processes. Further, *huaju* is arguably born at the junction of cross-cultural epistemologies. From its inception in the late Qing and early republican periods, foreign and fused performance idioms, characters, and themes have propelled its development. Therefore, *huaju* provides rich materials for cross-cultural studies. Last but not least, as Conceison and other scholars are well aware, *huaju*—as opposed to fiction, poetry, or *huaju*'s perceived counterpart, *xiqu* (traditional stylized theater)—has remained marginalized in Chinese studies. *Significant Other* sets out to change this, but at the same time the book reaches out to diverse groups of readers through an engaging prologue, a chapter providing a critical history of Sino-American relations, a chapter on Occidentalism, an accessible style, as well as a chronological structure for case studies that are grouped around related concepts such as exile, anti-Americanism, and American self-representation.

Prompted by this undue pressure to defend the choice of subject matter, *huaju*, Conceison points out in the prologue that “though the theatergoing population in China comprises only a slight percentage of the television- and film-viewing population, the influence of images emanating from the live stage is not inconsequential, [because these urbanite theatergoers] are usually highly educated [and . . .] likely to directly influence the course of future cultural and political interaction with the United States” (p. 10). The unique presence of “live corporeal representation of the Other” empowers ephemeral theater works to shape the cultural landscape in unique ways. Thus, even though Conceison declares in the prologue that the purpose of her study is to “provide some access” and “prompt further discussion” about selected “domestically recognized but internationally underacknowledged Chinese artists” (p. 12), *Significant Other’s* approach to intercultural issues and Sino-American relations is of interest not only to Chinese studies scholars but also to scholars in other disciplines who may not have otherwise included stage representations in their observation of the dizzying social and political changes in modern China. Many of the issues discussed within the pages of *Significant Other* have resonances beyond the confines of the theater scene.

An in-depth study of Chinese stage representations of Americans between 1987 and 2002 that manifested “intercultural idealism,” “neo-nationalism,” xenophobia, and anti-Americanism (p. 11), Conceison’s book challenges the paradigm of Occidentalism as simply a mode of reverse Orientalism by analyzing the plays both as text and production. These plays include *China Dream (Zhongguo meng, 1987)*, *The Great Going Abroad (Da liuyang, 1991)*, *Bird Men (Niaoren, 1993)*, *Student Wife (Peidu furen, 1995)*, *Dignity (Zunyan, 1997)*, *Che Guevara (Qie Gewala, 2000)*, and *Swing (Qiuqian qingren, 2002)*. Chapters 3 through 8 examine these plays in chronological order and take readers through various important historical junctures and significant moments in Sino-American relations. The study situates the American Other through two specific categories of analysis: “politics of identity” and “politics of location” (p. 30). The book traces the dynamics among the playwrights, directors, and Chinese and foreign actors (in the roles of Westerners on stage), as well as the audience. Conceison’s candid observation about her own involvement in the Chinese theater scene (Yu Luosheng’s *Student Wife*, for example; see chap. 6) also makes this study very valuable. Chinese society during the selected fifteen-year period of this study was marked by a sudden and extreme opening to the West after decades of physical and ideological closure. The Western and diasporic Chinese characters in the drama of this period therefore reflect many aspects of these cultural exchanges. At the same time, Conceison’s analyses of the complex cross-cultural epistemologies in these plays and performances emphasize the subjectivity of the Chinese artists and audiences that has not been given due attention in theories related to Orientalism, including Edward Said’s work. By tracing “a dynamic kind of ‘othering’” (p. 6), categorized as Occidentalism, in the fabric of the lives of Chinese,

Western, and diasporic Chinese characters on stage, Conceison urges her readers to reexamine the dynamics between perceived sameness and difference, taking into account different subject positions, including those of their own. China and its theater are no longer mere evidence or counterevidence for another theory, but a base for a revised theory of Occidentalism that takes into account the transnational spaces within and beyond the People's Republic of China that are created not only physically on stage but also metaphorically in the discourses around these plays.

Another important feature of the book is the way in which it embraces the personal. *Significant Other* exhibits not only more than a decade of careful archival research (of published reviews, unpublished manuscripts, historical documents), but also lived experience in rehearsal rooms, formal interviews, and informal conversations with many individuals. The author's unabashedly personal voice allows her readers to see how her involvement, among many other factors, affected the artists. The prologue begins with Julia Kristeva, Frantz Fanon, and others' responses to "being 'othered' as a foreigner." Conceison compares these Otherness experiences with those of her own, taking into account the complex emotions and practices that can be located at the junction of various forms of racial rhetoric and discourses. Conceison quickly and rightly points out that, quite different from Frantz Fanon's traumatic experience as a colonized Other in French Algeria, the American in China is what she calls a "significant Other" occupying a "privileged marginalized" position (p. 3). The non-self-indulgent first-person voice in these observations is remarkable, as are the ways in which these accounts illuminate the issues at stake in subsequent chapters. She speaks of her "privileged marginalization" as a Caucasian American living and doing research in China (p. 5), a complex identity perceived by her Chinese counterparts as simultaneously desirable and suspicious. These experiences and her desire to analyze issues of race and representation motivated Conceison to write the book. While explaining her motivation, Conceison reminisces: "the first time I saw a Western foreigner embodied on the . . . stage, I was immediately captivated . . . at once offended and intrigued . . . by this distorted image of 'myself'" (p. 6). As both an insider (deeply involved in the Chinese theater communities) and outsider (since she is a US-based scholar), Conceison brings to life the palpable world of contemporary Chinese theater through ethnographic observations.

Chapter 1, titled "Setting the Sino-American Stage," contextualizes the intercultural encounters and interracial casting in specific historical moments for each of the seven plays analyzed in the book, linking contemporary Chinese images of the foreign Other to residual and persistent patterns throughout Chinese history, including precolonial racism, early twentieth-century anti-imperialism, the anti-Americanism disseminated by the government during the Cultural Revolution, and the romanticization of America. This chapter also outlines the book's approach to the plays that the author believes best reflect the vicissitudes of the

Chinese idea of “America,” a “repository of impressions” and “imaginative constructions” (p. 27). *Significant Other* treats the ideas of “China” and “America” as the significant Other to each other, paying special attention to the dynamics in the ambiguous space between these two entities. Conceison identifies her approach as a “China-centered” one (p. 28), different from John Fairbank’s approach, which sees China as a static entity (p. 29). However, Conceison also readily admits that she does not replace the East-West binary and may not have escaped entirely the pitfall of comparative scholarship (p. 29). What is at stake is not the binary opposition in cultural production, but rather how its dynamics are studied. *Significant Other’s* contribution to the field of East-West comparative studies lies in its emphasis of the continual repositioning of the Self and the Other as well as the fluid process of theater making and image making. The study highlights “bilateral hegemonies” and their relationship to live theater and its audiences.

Within this historical framework, chapter 2 moves on to examine the theoretical implications of both the Chinese *huaju* practice of representation and the post-Orientalist discourse (p. 50) within the academe, especially the shifting paradigms of contemporary critical theory inspired by or reacting to Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. One of the strengths of this chapter is its thorough analysis of previous uses of the term “Occidentalism.” Even taken outside the context of the book, this chapter is a useful resource for anyone wanting an up-to-date critical reappraisal of the theory. In particular, Conceison’s deployment of the concept of Occidentalism differs from that of anthropologist James Carrier and that of Xiaomei Chen, who was the first one to bring the term to studies of contemporary China. Conceison identifies and articulates several points of contention. Conceison takes issue with Carrier’s use of the term “Occidentalism,” which inadvertently privileges the West as the “‘possessor’ of any given colonial or postcolonial discourse by virtue of its assumed pervasive political and cultural power, thereby...qualifying [non-Western] discourses with the prefix ‘ethno.’” Conceison argues that it is important to avoid the conventional “binaristic hierarchy of hegemony” (p. 52). To do so, she returns to Foucault’s idea of “discursive constellation” (p. 55) and proposes a more open-ended and “self-consciously temporal” method to study the operations of Occidental discourses (p. 54). Conceison believes that, contrary to Said’s hesitation, “examination of the way *we* are represented by *them*...can do much to balance the scales” and help to “construct Occidentalism as a discursive practice” (p. 66). What this theoretical chapter contributes to the current understanding of Orientalist and Occidental discourses is not a revelation of nonbinarist possibilities but rather its articulation of difference between subject and object positions. Conceison opines: “difference is *not* hierarchal in the traditional binarist sense, but *layered* in the sense of an intricate...web of instances” (p. 55).

Conceison’s choice of Occidentalism as a theoretical framework is clearly prompted by the interplay of images of China and America, and by what she calls “conversation[s] between Orientalism and Occidentalism [...that are]

potently present” in the plays she examines (p. 66). The dense historical contextualization and theorization in chapters 1 and 2 translate into illuminating case studies, in the subsequent chapters, of individual plays and their different productions, taking into account meanings gained and lost with different casts and locations. Chapter 3 discusses William Sun and Faye C. Fei’s 1986 play *China Dream*, a well-traveled hit play staged in New York, Tokyo, Singapore, Shanghai, and Beijing. Complicated by differing views of interculturalism and positive Sino-American relations in the late 1980s, the play also bears autobiographical traces of the playwrights’ own experiences in America. Chapter 4, “Exilic Absurdism,” develops the themes of cross-cultural movement of people and cultural goods. While *China Dream* demonstrates a “longing [for] the permanence of immigration” (p. 89), *The Great Going Abroad* (by Wang Peigong and Wang Gui) provides an interesting contrast, negotiating the meaning of exile (to America and within China). Unlike Mingming in *China Dream*, an immigrant in the United States, the characters in *The Great Going Abroad* are temporary visitors to America. Conceison traces the surface “orthodox Occidentalism” (p. 91) in the play’s anti-Americanism modeled on official neo-nationalist discourses in China, but she also highlights the creators’ real purpose, veiled by this surface message. Under the guise, the play is able to critique Chinese domestic politics. By simultaneously criticizing American and Chinese cultural practices, the play maps what Conceison believes to be the “*internal* exile of Chinese intellectuals who attempt to speak out from within the confinement of their own national borders” (p. 91). In the wake of the traumatic June 4, 1989, incident, *The Great Going Abroad* contemplates the meanings and necessity of exile within and beyond China’s borders. As such, the play vividly reflects the anxieties of the transitional period of 1989–1991.

Chapter 5 examines Guo Shixing’s *Bird Men*, which provides useful contrasts thematically and dramaturgically to *The Great Going Abroad* that was staged two years earlier. Both plays contain comedic scenes with ironic exaggerations of stereotypes. Conceison also observes that both plays employ anti-Americanism and nationalism as devices to mask their critique of Chinese stereotypical perceptions of itself and America. However, aside from these features, the two plays and their productions and reception differ dramatically. While the coauthors of *The Great Going Abroad* chose to avoid public attention (hence censorship) and mainstream venues, Guo gave his play to China’s premiere theater company, the Beijing People’s Art Theater. It ran successfully for two years in Beijing and toured Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Taipei. Another contrast with *China Dream* and *The Great Going Abroad* is that Paul Ding, the protagonist of *Bird Men*, is a Chinese-American going abroad (leaving the United States for China). Conceison notes the overtone of June 4, 1989, in the play, which turns the direction in which the Occidental Other travels from East to West (overseas students or immigrants in America) to West to East (a Chinese American “returning” to his “homeland” for

the first time). Rey Chow's notion of primitivism in Chinese cinema in *Primitive Passion* is employed in this chapter to further analyze this complex play in which the Occidental Other becomes simultaneously the object of the Chinese gaze and a device to construct national identities (pp. 122–123).

Another Occidental Other that is present in *Bird Men* is Charlie, an American representative from the International Bird Preservation Organization, who is performed by a Chinese actor in a wig and makeup to resemble a Caucasian man. Chapter 6 examines a major shift in this representational practice when Western actors are called upon to portray Western roles on stage in Yu Luosheng's *Student Wife*, allowing disparate groups of Shanghai audiences in 1995 to see various layers of signification. According to Conceison, Chinese residents were attracted by the unique opportunity to see “live foreigners speaking Chinese... alongside native characters,” while Western expatriates in Shanghai could “see themselves reflected in flesh and blood on stage for the first time in China” (p. 137). While Chinese audiences were not unfamiliar with expatriate actors speaking fluent Chinese on television, such as Mark Rowswell (Dashan), it was the first opportunity for Western and Chinese actors to share the *huaju* stage in an intercultural project. The significance of *Student Wife* goes beyond the lure of the visual and its verisimilitude. The relationships among directors, actors, and audiences changed dramatically, as the Othering takes different directions on stage and new intercultural dimensions are explored.

Yu Luosheng continued his experiment in multiracial casting in *Dignity* in 1998 in the wake of a new crisis in Sino-American relations triggered by the visit of Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui (Li Denghui) to the United States to attend a reunion at Cornell University in 1995. Chapter 7 explores this play along with another play, *Che Guevara*, that shares the anti-Americanist theme. Conceison demonstrates how the collaborative process in theater affected the images of Americans projected on stage, some of which were unintended by the theater artists in the first place. Chapter 8 returns to Sun and Fei's work and continues to explore the ephemeral and fluid processes in theater. Staged in Shanghai in 2002, *Swing*, another intercultural romance initially scripted by Sun and Fei, not only reflected changing perceptions of America at the turn of the century, but was also the product of collective revisioning by many individuals involved in its production, including the director, the producer, and an American actor with his own agenda to counter the anti-American stereotype.

These plays encapsulate vicissitudes of historical exigencies throughout the 1980s and the 1990s. Conceison opines in the epilogue that since the “construction and dissemination of images of... the American Other... is a... complex process utilized for multiple purposes,” the performative and discursive processes of Occidentalism must be recognized as “containing this... fluidity... [that] marks one of its distinct differences from its adjacent practice Orientalism” (pp. 229–230). Chinese-Western cultural exchanges have been a complex subject of study with a long history. As shown by a number of works

Conceison touched upon (in chap. 3 and the epilogue) but necessarily could not analyze (to avoid distraction)—such as William Sun’s *Awakening from the American Dream* (*Ganwu Meiguo meng*, 1999)—the plays that *Significant Other* deals with are clearly not isolated instances. *Significant Other* may well inspire other studies on the cultural dynamics in theater and beyond, including works that represent China’s many Others in various ways from other periods or even other parts of the Chinese-speaking world and the Chinese diaspora. On the other hand, nonspecialist readers will benefit from the variety of plays (in terms of themes and styles) selected for analysis. Emphasizing the often incoherent and fluctuating American dream and its attendant “China” dreams, *Significant Other* is also a useful textbook that thematically introduces students to contemporary Chinese culture and Sino-American imaginaries through theater works.

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- NOTES
1. Jonathan Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 241.