

RETHINKING CHINESE POPULAR CULTURE: Cannibalizations of the Canon. Edited by Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow. London and New York: Routledge, 2008. xi, 288 pp. US\$160.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-415-46880-0.

“Once [the Chinese] people learn to read, it is as though they are automatically contaminated by this disease of canonicity,” wrote Lu Xun in the 1920s. Taking a cue from such and other physiological metaphors, Carlos Rojas outlines, in his introduction to the volume, the dialectics between canonical and “popular” modes of literary expression; one of the contributors suggests the notion of academic and popular canons as “products of broader consensus” (Hamm, 75). As announced in its title and introduction, the book’s goal, therefore, is to “rethink the very question of what it means to speak of popular culture in the first place” by uncoupling the hermeneutic tendencies from “the kinds of texts to which they have traditionally been applied,” and by ambitiously placing equal emphasis on “textual and contextual considerations in reading *all* texts, be they popular, canonical, or otherwise” (4). It is unclear, though, exactly what constitutes “popular culture” except for a sense of political urgency and paradoxically contrarian contentions: “symbiosis of popular and canonical culture’s mutual cultivation and consumption” (11); hence the theme of “cannibalization” in the book’s subtitle. While focusing on literature, the book also deals with media commonly studied in the field of popular culture. Among the genres, literary schools and works examined are the, “Mandarin ducks” and “butterflies” novels, Zhang Henshui, Jin Yong’s martial-arts fiction, Eileen Chang, Wang Shuo, Mo Yan, Tsui Hark’s films, and Wang Wenxing and Shi Shuqing. The book’s title may lead readers to expect the inclusion of certain types of works that are not dealt with within these pages or the exclusion of certain writers.

A collection of thirteen essays on popular literature of modern and contemporary China and an essay on Taiwan, *Rethinking Chinese Popular Culture* approaches the dynamics between the canonical and the popular from the perspective of literary studies. Over half of the essays have appeared in print elsewhere previously. Two essays were translated from Chinese by Rojas. The essays are divided into four sections: Producing Popularity, Canonical Reflections, Nostalgia and Amnesia, and Gender and Desire. The book opens with an exploration of overlooked writers in an ostensibly marginal genre, the “butterfly” literature of the 1930s, such as Zeng Jinke. Michel Hockx argues against the common assumption about the oppositional relationship between a May Fourth “progressive” tradition and an unenlightened “popular” literature. This essay’s main contribution lies in its historical analysis of the reception of such works and canonization processes.

Even though Zeng is commonly seen as a purveyor of what is vaguely categorized as popular culture, Hockx suggests that writers associated with the Friday School were “part and parcel of an elite culture” because their aesthetic

focuses on literature's "ability to stimulate friendship, in line with classical ideals, while simultaneously revelling in the opportunities for self-expression" (35). David Der-wei Wang examines the same genre under different historical circumstances: how Qiu Shouou's *Begonia* (1943), one of the most popular butterfly novels, commonly regarded as a mere tearjerker and violating the wartime formula for national literature, became wildly popular during the Second Sino-Japanese War. He suggests that this is because the novel "hit home at its wartime readers' anxieties over gender identity" (212). The theme of social networks is also central to Alexander Des Forges' essay which examines the turn-of-the-century historical processes through which authors emerged as professional writers, branding themselves with distinct identities as opposed to journalists. Eileen Chow tackles the journalistic impulse of popular literature and literariness of newspaper through a case study of how Zhang Henshui's *Unofficial History of the Old Capital*, a serialized novel in the 1920s, novelized news (72). Another fascinating story of a writer's own attempts to popularize and canonize his works is Jin Yong's serialized and decidedly "popular," by any standard, martial-arts novels, as analyzed by John Christopher Hamm.

Michael Berry traces the appropriation and accumulation of symbolic popular and elite cultural capital in Zhang Beihai's *Swallow* (2000) and Ye Zhaoyan's *Nanjing 1937* (1996), both set in 1936-1937. Ping-hui Liao reinterprets Taiwan "elite" writers Wang Wenxing's modernist *Backed against the Sea* and Shi Shuqing's "postcolonial" "Hong Kong Trilogy" and *Light Drunken Makeup* (parody of the butterfly literature) with an eye on their appropriation of romantic conventions. Liao devotes the other half of his essay to poignant observations of the rewriting of butterfly motifs and transnational capital in the ads in Taipei MRT subway's underground mall featuring images of young women as desiring and desirable consumers.

As a compact volume on a complex subject, the book draws upon a diverse range of materials, including Lu Xun's and Liang Qichao's theoretical foundations for transforming popular literature into a vehicle for May Fourth social reform, and Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," which, as Rojas argues, represents the watershed of socialist realism's paradoxical status of both "paradigmatically orthodox and quintessentially popular" (3) until the early 1980s. This volume would be a useful resource for students of modern and contemporary literature of China.

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