

Muslim population is today found in Southeast Asia. Zheng He, the Chinese admiral, marks the end of the booklet, and several geographical and political aspects of his expeditions are discussed.

The final discussion is again focused on China, which wishes for a peaceful exchange in this region, in contrast to the Dutch and British in former, and the Americans in recent times (p. 51) and stimulates a “maritime culture” (*haiyang wenhua* 海洋文化), obviously in the wake of the “one belt one road” initiative. One can find announcements for a national contest of “maritime knowledge” (*haiyang zhishi* 海洋知识) on Chinese campuses, and one may advocate with China an Indian Ocean of harmony and exchange. Ptak implicitly favours such a vision (one must bear in mind that his booklet is based on a public lecture) and would like the Chinese to acknowledge the model of Fernand Braudel.

In spite of its small size the booklet offers many interesting considerations on the history of the Indian Ocean based on decades of research by the author. A table of contents would have been useful, but the reading can be done in an evening. However, it is written in German.

Ralph Kauz
University of Bonn

XIAORONG LI:

The Poetics and Politics of Sensuality in China: The Fragrant and Bedazzling Movement (1600–1930).

(Cambria Sinophone World Series.) x, 331 pp. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press. 2019. ISBN 978 160497952 7.

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The volume presents the documented history of the marginalized tradition of erotic lyricism that extolled amorous desire and romantic love, “intoxicating the heart and swaying the soul” (醉心蕩魄). *Xiangyan* 香艷, rendered with “fragrance and charm” or “fragrance and dazzlement”, and summarizes the sensualist lyrical poetry and literature. The book uncovers and examines several primary sources, such as the monumental anthologies of sensual poetry compiled in both the late Ming and the late Qing periods, prefaces, and modern magazines, most of them translated for the first time.

Li Xiaorong – author of valuable articles and of the volume *Women’s Poetry of Late Imperial China: Transforming the Inner Chambers* – is successful in accomplishing the aims of her project, and answering the questions she raises in the introduction. “What did it mean aesthetically and politically to write about sensuality (i.e., the corporeal body and amorous desire) in the historical contexts? What is written and made into poetic discourse and aesthetics? What is made political? Why can the sensual poetry and poets examined in this book be deemed a significant alternative literary trend and intellectual movement in Chinese history? How and why does this little studied aspect of Chinese history matter? Deeply intertwined with several well-known intellectual movements but previously not recognized as such, how does it enable us to better understand these broader movements?” (pp. 38–9).

The six chapters of the book revolve around the above questions by focusing on the historical evolution of this poetic tradition in two moments, the late Ming and late Qing–early Republic. The first three chapters focus on the rebellion of the major

sensualist poets of the late Ming against the civil service institution and its ideology. Education was centred on the preparation of students for the civil examination system, but the number of appointments was far fewer than the number of students. Thus in most cases, students failed and swelled the ranks of a newly emergent intelligentsia. Among them, a certain sense of disillusionment with imperial power grew, and new countercultures and lifestyles emerged. Thus, Wang Cihui expresses his shift of interest from the public career to the pleasures of life: “I have accepted that my luck in love compromised my talent for fame” (p. 91). The “cult of *qing*” was an expression of these circles. Li Xiaorong places the major sensualist poets as a radical branch of this cult and describes their challenge to poetic, aesthetic, and socioethical norms. Moreover, she demonstrates they also developed a distinctive poetics and aesthetics that sublimate sensuality and romance into a moral goal in its own right. Emblematic is the praise for eccentricity and obsessions, and for instance the new lifestyle of “reclusion in sensual beauty”, *seyin* 色隱. The representation of indulgence in sensuality and romantic relationships challenged the Confucian rules and culture.

The second half of the book deals with the second trend of sensual poetries and brings to light how some late Qing and Republican intellectuals – among them the members of the South Society (Nan she 南社), as well as the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School writers – revisited tradition for reforming aesthetic rules, literature, and life in periods of great social and political crises. Here the most original part of the book is elaborated by taking the apparently paradoxical thesis of the creative association of the sensualist genre with “the nation’s reform” (維新) and “national learning” (國學). The paradox is that both the Qing Reformist movement and neo-traditionalists were morally suspicious of this “outrageous” literary genre. The sensual lyricism writers of late imperial and early Republican China went on rebelling against orthodox Neo-Confucianism, but also the radical cultural programmes of the late Qing Occidentalists and the New Culture Movement of the Republic. Their reformist spirit did not accept the suppression of the Chinese lyrical tradition: they shared a “neo-traditionalist” approach in preserving an element of native Chinese culture but were not “reactionary”, as they challenged traditional moral and aesthetic standards, subverting the Confucian hierarchy of relations and the orthodox socially oriented Neo-Confucianism; at the same time their counter-hegemonic discourse was against the radical cultural agendas of the late Qing Reform and the New Culture Movement. They promoted classical erotic lyricism and the fulfilment of individual expression of desires against the old and new theories assigning sociopolitical functions to literature.

The uncovered passages from important but neglected writings are well translated and clearly explained and annotated, so that the book is not only a repository of new and conventional love motifs but is also very readable. Li highlights the peculiar historical role of this literary genre, its continuity and discontinuity, its tradition and its political implications, and emphasizes the literary modernization operated by the sensuality and “decadence” of China’s erotic lyrical tradition.

By carefully examining literary materials, this is a valuable contribution to Chinese literary and aesthetic studies, but also to the intellectual history of 300 years, by situating the two crucial *fin-de-siècle* periods of decadence and innovation in their historical and cultural milieu. It is a deep study well documented and endowed with convincing arguments on the conception of eroticism in modern China and connections between sensualist poetry and politics until modern times, through allegories that free literature from Confucian moral rules and political order instead of subjecting it to them:

the exploration of a sensual poetics and aesthetics became a site of resistance for cultural dissidents to counteract the Confucian teaching of poetics and

ethics, to promote sensual pleasure and romantic love, and to address the radical cultural and political transformations in the age of Westernization/modernization. If the ‘fragrant and bedazzling’ images were still encoded with deeper political meanings, they were no longer the conventional metaphors for the minister–ruler relationship or its extension, loyalism or patriotism. . . . China’s lyrical tradition is sexier and more ‘modern’ – and that sensual lyricism is more political – than existing histories have led us to believe (p. 10).

Paolo Santangelo
Sapienza University of Rome

FAN PAN LI CHEN (ed. and trans.):

Marionette Plays from Northern China.

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This is an important book of translations of interesting and unique, as well as some quite funny, string theatre puppet texts from a genre in northern China that is in decline. It opens a window for the Western reader on the lively local Chinese performing arts tradition and the diversity of topics presented in the puppet theatre.

Translations of Chinese puppet theatre plays have been rather limited, which is unfortunate as the puppet theatre not only has a much longer tradition than the actors’ theatre (opera), but it also has a unique repertoire that deserves greater scholarly attention. Earlier publications by the author (*Chinese Shadow Theatre: History, Popular Religion and Women Warriors*, Montreal, 2007 and *Visions for the Masses: Shadow Plays from Shaanxi and Shanxi*, Ithaca, 2010) contain complete translations into English of unique Chinese shadow plays. Fan Pan Li Chen’s new book continues her puppet theatre research and translation work and starts with a useful and concise introduction to the history of puppet theatre in China. This is followed by an introduction to the Heyang marionette/string puppet theatre from the region north of the city of Xi’an. The puppeteers mention that the genre dates back to the Tang dynasty, which is indeed possible, as marionette theatre is already mentioned in a poem by Tang emperor Xuanzong (685–762), whose court was in the Tang imperial capital of Chang’an, present day Xi’an.

The genre did not escape the socio-political experiments of the People’s Republic of China. After 1949, the more than 30 remaining companies were forcefully disbanded, and only a state company continued to perform, albeit with apparent success. The author observes a definite decline after economic reforms that started in the 1980s. Only three companies currently perform, and they lead a marginal existence, performing for local sponsors and tourists. As the entertainment function of the theatre dwindles everywhere in modern China, the repertoire of the companies in Heyang is likewise reduced to a mere shadow of its former glory. The claim by the Heyang people that almost the whole repertoire of the Heyang marionette theatre was written (and sometimes performed) by scholars, and would-be scholars, is impossible to prove, yet it does give the genre a certain prestige and identification with the former (imperial) elite.