

the subject, nor checked the accuracy of her claims with any care. We are told on two occasions, for instance, that “China is made up of five provinces,” (pp. 87, 122) (perhaps “region” got lost in translation). Journalist Maureen Fan, we are told, is affiliated with “the Washington Post Foreign Service.” One might forgive such malapropisms if the book, written after all by a design professional, offered new insights into the interesting world of contemporary Chinese design. Instead, we are given rather sophomoric and disjointed observations about Chinese society and its changing values. That such a book, which adds so little to our knowledge, should appear under the imprint of the MIT Press is more than a little surprising.

At one point, Justice accepts uncritically the comment by one Chinese designer that China would be producing competitive large passenger aircraft today if its indigenous research and design activities had not been interrupted by a decision to make components for Boeing (p. 57). Would that Pang and Justice together had followed up on this remark and taken up the Yun 10 programme and Chinese efforts to reverse engineer the 707! A fuller account of the future of China’s creative industries and the relationships among creativity, copying and indigenous design might result. But, as it is, the two books fall short – albeit, in different ways – of satisfying our curiosity about where China is going with its efforts to establish itself as a 21st-century creative society and innovative economy.

RICHARD P. SUTTMEIER

[petesutt@uoregon.edu](mailto:petesutt@uoregon.edu)

*Maoist Model Theatre: The Semiotics of Gender and Sexuality in Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)*

ROSEMARY A. ROBERTS

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Rosemary Roberts’s *Maoist Model Theatre* is the first book-length study in English on the popular symbolism of gender and sexuality in the “model works,” *yangbanxi*, of Cultural Revolution China. The “model works” are renowned for their specific origins in the Cultural Revolution period, during which Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s last wife, developed and designated them to establish a new proletarian art form as she wrestled with the conservatives for Party leadership. As Roberts has correctly noted, although many elements of the *yangbanxi* operas had existed prior to the Cultural Revolution, Jiang Qing played a crucial role in selecting from a larger group of experimental modernized Beijing Operas and then bringing together the nation’s best artists and performers to refine the “model works” under her guidance. Analysing a dozen or so *yangbanxi* operas, ballets and symphonic suites, Roberts deftly unpacks the ways in which gendered meanings are constructed through different theatrical systems: role assignment, costume, props, kinesics and linguistics.

One of the central aims of the book is to revise the conventional depiction of the Cultural Revolution as a period of the “erasure of gender and sexuality.” Roberts argues that far from being “erased,” the discourse and cultural parameters of gender and sexuality were reconfigured along political lines in this pivotal period of PRC history: “with the parameters for ‘the revolution’ shifted towards the masculine end of the gender continuum and the parameters for the ‘counter revolution’ shifted towards the feminine end. Within each political category, revolutionary and counter-

revolutionary, relative gender differentiation was maintained” (p. 23). The author should be lauded for proposing an ambitious approach to challenging the earlier insights of Meng Yue, Mayfair Yang and others, who have characterized this period as “genderless.” Roberts’s refreshing perspective not only complicates our under-developed understandings of Maoist-era cultural history, but also provides a new angle for looking at familiar sources. However, as the above quote makes clear, Roberts’s analysis often suffers from a simple conceptualization of “gender differentiation,” or the meanings of “masculine” and “feminine” as analytic categories, thereby reinforcing rather than challenging the very binary oppositions she claims to exceed.

One example comes from her analysis of leadership roles assigned to women in *yangbanxi*. In discussing the role distribution of central female heroic characters, Roberts’s overarching point is that “If we start by examining the contexts in which the *yangbanxi* heroines are placed, we can see that Maoist thought combines with traditional gender beliefs to perpetuate gender role divisions and the traditional gender hierarchy in new forms” (p. 42). The *yangbanxi* opera most famous for featuring a female Party representative leader is perhaps none other than *Azalea Mountain*. It is true that the central heroine, Ke Xiang, initially faced an enormous measure of resistance among the men whom she tried to win over at Azalea Mountain. Yet, it would be inadequate to interpret this plot on a basic structural level to mean “male power is not to be questioned while female power is a source of doubt and questioning; female leaders cannot control their subordinates whereas male leaders can” (p. 45). Such a structural reading is insufficient because it neglects the wide spectrum of possible signification enabled by the cultural-semiotic representations of gender. In other words, this is merely one (and perhaps the least surprising) of the many possible ways of conveying the significance of Ke Xiang’s leadership role in the opera. One could also say, for instance, that Ke Xiang’s overall role overturns normative expectations of what a woman *can* accomplish. After all, she eventually wins over the same group of men who repeatedly questioned her from the start. Should the emphasis be placed on Ke Xiang’s initial difficulty or the power she later held over her male subordinates?

It is surprising for a book on the semiotics of gender and sexuality to remain remarkably silent on the theory of gender citationality developed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1989), which is absent from the bibliography. Butler’s work, of course, relied on earlier studies of ideological interpellation by Louis Althusser, whom Roberts cites. But Butler’s theorization is most pertinent to grasping the meanings of gender and sexuality in Maoist model theatre, because it questions any stance that posits a core “essence” to gender identity. When applied to our assessment of the gendering nature of role assignments in *yangbanxi*, this theoretical perspective challenges a structural equation of “successful” leadership with masculinity. Rather, in the example of Ke Xiang’s leadership role in *Azalea Mountain*, the performance of her leadership ability itself is an act of gender subversion: it shows that her leadership is not a copy of an “original” masculine role or identity, but the “original” masculine connotations of political leadership are already a “copy” whose signification crucially anchors on its iteration and citation on other genderly marked bodies.

The gendering of the intertextual discourse on leadership in the *yangbanxi*, therefore, cannot be settled on the degree of success achieved by heroine characters in the plot narrative. It would be too easy to identify this criterion simply as a semiotic source for perpetuating traditional gender hierarchies. Alternatively, by exposing and destabilizing the constructed nature of these gender hierarchies, a more

theoretically layered reading would highlight the performative interpellations of gender coding in Cultural Revolution model works.

HOWARD CHIANG

H.H.Chiang@warwick.ac.uk

*A Common Strangeness: Contemporary Poetry, Cross-Cultural Encounter, Comparative Literature*

JACOB EDMOND

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*A Common Strangeness*, the inspiring title of this book, is a phrase taken from Maurice Blanchot and here used by Jacob Edmond to encapsulate a poetics that brings together six very different poets: Bei Dao (1949–), Charles Bernstein (1950–), Dragomoshchenko (1946–), Lyn Hejinian (1941–), Prigov (1940–2007), and Yang Lian (1954–). The study's temporal frame covers the last three decades, a period of time during which a series of historical, political and economic factors brought the Cold War to an end and globalism to the fore.

While many comparative literary studies have used textual and contextual analysis to examine authors and literary movements so as to show commonalities and differences, Edmond employs a different methodology. The domestic political and literary contexts, although a constant presence in the background, are only lightly sketched, and focus is directed on the concerns that have shaped the work of these authors in the world, as members of a transnational poetic community. Translation is yet another diffused activity that touches upon the selected creative and conceptual practices, providing an extra motive for gathering these poets together in this book.

The author thus sets out to offer an alternative reading of “global” poetic interactions that is able to overcome the binary oppositions produced by a Cold War mentality, and an emphasis on the differences between them and us, between the native and the foreign, the global and local, and between commonness and strangeness. Rather, Edmond proposes to take these six poets, two each chosen from the linguistic contexts of Chinese, Russian and American, as exemplary members of “an imagined transnational poetic community” (p. 6) who share pervasive cross-cultural encounter, dislocation inside and outside the national borders, and a strong disbelief in the unity of signifier and signified.

Of great interest to this reader is the section dedicated to Charles Bernstein and his view of poetic styles as following the rapid logic of business and fashion (p. 178). The idea is perhaps reminiscent of the 16th and 17th centuries' understanding of commerce as a principal mechanism guaranteeing social vitality. The same could easily be said of translation mediated movement of ideas and forms and the ways these facilitate the dissemination of poetic devices and concepts. I greatly appreciated Edmond's discussion of the claims Bernstein makes in relation to his “ideolectical” poetics, which uses devices such as the inclusion of various modes of nonstandard English to question and undermine the centric point of view (pp. 164–92). The issues discussed in this section are still highly relevant to contemporary Sinophone, Lusophone, Anglophone, Francophone and other centric-phone texts that despite their avowed intentions are still unable to transcend the centre-periphery mentality.

The chapters on Hejinian and Dragomoshchenko are very persuasive; the strong links between these two poets' approaches to estrangement in creation and translation