

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jeffrey C. Kinkley. *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 304 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-16768-0.

Reviewed by Nathaniel Isaacson (North Carolina State University)

Published on H-Asia (August, 2015)

Commissioned by Douglas Slaymaker

Jeffrey Kinkley's *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels* is a rigorous examination of seventeen novels and novellas primarily written by Mo Yan, Su Tong, Yu Hua, Zhang Wei, Ge Fei, Wang Anyi, and Han Shaogong. Kinkley identifies many of the most well-known works by these authors and others as "new historical novels," characterized both by "original and yet mutually enforcing grand ideas about twentieth-century Chinese history," but also characterized by their strongly dystopian vision (p. i). Kinkley argues that many of the avant-garde authors of the 1980s shifted away from their earlier experimentalism to pen the "marvelous" historical epics of the 1990s and 2000s. In the introductory chapter, "Chinese Visions of History and Dystopia," the author explains what he means by "historical novels," and "new historical novels" describing the latter as full-length novels and novellas that deny and defy previous national historical narratives, typically with a political edge that bears heavy implications for the present and future, and that also reflect familiarity with, even when rebounding from, magical realism, surrealism, fantasy, allegory, metahistorical questioning, parody, self-parody, pastiche, the absurd, and various experimental, dissociated, and nonlinear representations of time that were avant-garde in 1980s China.

Kinkley identifies these authors and their work as the product of the post-Tiananmen cultural shift, characterized by their motion away from the roots-seeking and avant-garde experimentalism that many of these authors were known for in the 1980s in favor of more approachable but still highly innovative styles. The author argues that there is "hardly a more 'important' body of Chinese fiction in the 1990s than the new historical novels," demonstrated by their wide translation abroad, their critical acclaim and the fact that a number of the novels analyzed were adapted into films by fifth-generation directors (p. 9). The introduction further situates these works in the global dystopian tradition of authors such as George Orwell, William Golding, Cormac McCarthy, as

well as a number of authors from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and even the *Mad Max* film series, while noting that their dystopian tendencies need not imply any filiation with science fiction or futurism. Particular attention is given to identifying the pronounced influence that Miguel Asturias's *Men of Maize* (1949) and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez had on the work of the authors studied.

The four principal chapters could be described as a hermeneutic spiral recapitulating Nathan Sivin's description of Chinese cosmology—"a remarkably articulated nest of cycles" (quoted, p. 74)—visiting and revisiting the historical and dystopian dimensions of these authors' works in order to elucidate their significance. Themes initially discussed in one chapter are often elaborated upon from a slightly different perspective later. Chapter 2, "Discomforts of Temporal Anomie," expounds upon the temporal ambiguity that many of the novels in question feature. Kinkley argues that the absence of certain historical details and frequent anachronisms are a salient feature of the new historical novel. Contradictorily, while being "about history," years and eras often go unspecified, while narratives that specify the time feature jarring anachronisms. The elision of major historical events like the death of Chairman Mao, the Great Leap Forward and the ensuing famine, and the Cultural Revolution is especially noticeable in the works analyzed. Chapter 3, "Projections of Historical Repetition," analyzes "temporal circularity" in many of these novels. Repetition in part accounts for the historical lacunae examined in chapter 2 by suggesting that the depredations of any given era are regularly reenacted, if not constant, leading the author to conclude that "dystopia is eternal rather than futuristic" (p. xiv). Chapter 4, "Alienation from the Group," discusses the absence of strong social bonds and explores how other bonds such as the family are depicted as corrupt and corrosive. Alongside the absence of reference to specific political movements, Kinkley notes a sense of geopolitical isolation. Many of these dystopias

correspond to China's physical geography, but are seemingly isolated from political geography. The fictional towns of China's new historical novels may be explicitly located in Shandong, Hunan, or south of the Yangzi River between Nanjing and Shanghai, but there is "little or no reference to the national capital, the provincial capital, the county town (except in Ge Fei's closing volumes), or other seats of higher civilization and political-social order" (p. 165). Chapter 5, "Anarchy: Social, Moral, and Cosmic," focuses on the novelists' horrifying depictions of chaos and social disorder that these novels also feature. Each of these historical and dystopian frames in turn features fractal spurs spiraling off from the main theme. For example, "Alienation from the Group," is divided into three smaller sections consisting of alienation from community, from within the "prison" of the family, and from the ostensibly hopeful perspective of the depiction of friends and collaborators. In his reading of Zhang Wei's *The Ancient Ship* (*Gu chuan*, 1987), Kinkley suggests that China's new historical novelists are deeply critical not only of the past, but also of the headlong plunge into state-capitalist marketization. Chapter 6, the concluding section, "discusses the place of China's high literary historical novels in the twenty-first century, in light of politics, postmodernism, modernism, national allegory and the ascendancy of Mo Yan" (p. xiv). Kinkley draws a line between "new historical" writers and the contemporary generation of Chinese authors whose work more closely resembles the McOndo successors of Latin American magical realism and a coterie of narcissistic Anglophone writers whose style is "sensationalistic, ephemeral, affected, pedantic and egotistical" (p. 199).

Acknowledging that this is primarily a study of novels, I still found the analysis to be the most engaging when the author ventures into cultural study. For example, a section in the introduction detailing the intellectual contortionism that goes in to producing a high school history textbook is riveting, tragic, comedic, and makes the elisions and ideological somersaults of the novels discussed appear more understandable and historically accurate by comparison. Kinkley's reading of Zhang Yimou's film adaptations of *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984), the television series *Deathsong on the River* (aka *River Elegy*, 1988), and other films demonstrates how tropes and topoi of cultural stasis, backwardness, and historical ambiguity have been adopted in the visual arts.

Bodily disability, mutilation, and disease are recurrent themes, again symptomatic of broader social dysfunction. Kinkley identifies communist land reform ef-

forts as one of the major concrete historical events at the heart of the dystopian tradition of China's new historical novel. The ravages of war against a foreign enemy pale in comparison to the intimate forms of emotional and physical torture exacted by neighbors and family members, both of which are occasionally elevated to the level of a perverse aesthetic of suffering. Acknowledging the long list of respected monographs on the topic of trauma in Chinese literature, Kinkley argues that the Hobbesian image of "all against all" is just as important a lens for the authors included in his study. Demonstrating the differences between new historical novelist's vision of human nature and the dominant Mencian paradigm, Kinkley offers a brief history of the translation of Darwinian thought into Chinese by intellectuals like Lu Xun and the continued social Darwinist bent of Maoist ideology, and how these ideas bleed over into the new historical novel.

Kinkley argues that Lu Xun "believed in progress, Darwin, and progressive modernity coming to the world," seeing China at the turn of the twentieth century as "simply backward," and argues that new historical fiction has transcended the didactic goal of national renewal at the heart of Lu Xun's oeuvre (p. 179). The study (or perhaps my own poor understanding) would have benefited from a closer reading of Lu Xun's early essays on evolution, "Lessons from the History of Science" (*Kexue shi jiaopian*, 1902) and "The History of Man" (*Ren zhi lishi*, 1907), both of which accepted the basic premises of Darwinian evolution but are rife with the anxiety that decline is as likely as progress. While Kinkley brings James Pusey's *China and Charles Darwin* (1983) and Yan Fu's translation of *Evolution and Ethics* (1896-98) to bear in demonstrating that social competition and decline are leitmotifs in China's new historical fiction, this struck me as one moment among many where his expert close readings of contemporary authors could have been availed by more thorough historical contextualization and comparison. Opportunities for comparisons between Lu Xun in particular, and the omnipresence of disability, disease, and social turmoil in modern Chinese literature at large and the works at hand struck me as an underused resource in the study.

Kinkley occasionally suggests that these narratives can be read allegorically. Again, I found the masterful close readings of the novels concerned to be most convincing when the author details what these allegorical associations might be. For example, in enumerating the similarities and differences between Ge Fei's fictional tourist theme park village in *Southlands Trilogy* (*Jiangnan sanbuqu*, coll. 2012), and the real life pseudo-collective

theme park “commune” of Huaxi, and the uncanny entanglements of socialist and postsocialist, utopian and dystopian life in both, Kinkley demonstrates how Ge Fei’s work functions as dystopian historical commentary. In unpacking the relationship between dystopia and the utopian impulse in the trilogy and especially in his correlation of the fictional town of Huajiashe to the contemporary town of Huaxi—a state-capitalist corporate village just miles from Ge Fei’s fictional Jiangnan setting—the author unveils the broader cultural significance of the new historical novel.

The author avers that when dystopias are so pervasive, they tend to become quotidian and ultimately lose their meaning, asking, “If dystopia is embodied not only in Orwellian futurism, but also in stability, recurrence, and ‘guaranteed happiness’ safe from ‘anarchy’ and disapproved trends in culture, how can one not be bored?” (p. 201). The author seems to have answered this question a few pages earlier, with the observation that, “to Mo Yan’s generation, the opposite of utopian idealism is not dystopian speculation, which is still idealistic, but

cynicism and hedonism” (p. 198). The author’s differentiation between the new historical novelists and the generation of authors like Wei Hui and Han Han who have succeeded them implies that while these novels may be dystopian, they are not nihilistic. One possible response to an overwhelmingly pessimistic body of work summarized in the author’s closing summation that “God is dead; ‘life’ disappoints” (p. 207), is the conclusion that “one cannot abandon hope, for hope lies in the future.”[1]

This is an original and penetrating book on the prevalence of dystopian tropes and topoi in the most globally significant Chinese-language fiction of turn-of-the-twentieth-century China, and its complicated relationship to history. It is an excellent resource for both students and advanced scholars of modern Chinese literature and history.

Note

[1]. Lu Xun, *Lu Xun QuANJI*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2005), 441.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Nathaniel Isaacson. Review of Kinkley, Jeffrey C., *Visions of Dystopia in China’s New Historical Novels*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. August, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44707>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.