BOOK REVIEWS

La réforme de l’opéra de Pékin [Peking opera reform]. By Maël Renouard. xxiv + 73 pp. Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2013. Paper €5.10.

No other Western country flirted as passionately with Maoism, nor was so widely seduced by the promised new start of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), as France. Bearing testimony to this are any number of cultural artifacts, from Nino Ferrer’s debonair (but wretchedly-pronounced) Mandarin in his pop hit “Mao et Moa” (punningly, “Mao and Me”; 1967), to filmmaker Jean Yanne’s viciously hilarious satire Les Chinois à Paris (Chinese in Paris; based on a novel by Robert Beauvais, 1974), about Paris under PLA occupation. Yanne’s film contains an almost convincing production of Carmen as a revolutionary ballet under the “Chinese” name of Carmeng at the Palais Garnier, and it is also towards Chinese revolutionary theater that the young author, Maël Renouard (b. 1978), turned his attention in his third novel (its length is modest enough that some would classify it as a short story), which won the 2014 edition of the prestigious Prix Décembre, and is the subject of this review.

The plot proceeds with briskness bordering on recklessness. The first-person narrator begins with a Communist party intellectual, of (rather dangerous) patriotic bourgeois class background, trying to play it safe through the cultural skirmishes of the 1950s. For about a page and a half, he is assigned to Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915–1989; then leader of the Communist Youth League) to be amanuensis and censor to Puyi 溥儀 (1906–1986), the deposed emperor. Then, too rapidly, he falls under the influence of Gang of Four member Yao Wenyuan 姚文元 (1931–2005) at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, and becomes one of the principal (if invisible) architects of the Revolutionary Model Operas. The protagonist’s romantic life is dispatched in a few lines with this account of a triangular relationship involving the actors in The Red Lantern (Hongdeng ji 紅燈記), a central Revolutionary Model Opera:

La coeur de Tang Meiyu ne cessait pas de balancer entre Qian et moi. Quand il fut jeté en prison après l’arrestation de la Bande des Quatre, elle vint vivre avec moi; elle s’en alla avec lui lorsqu’il fut libéré, sept ans plus tard. Je ne l’ai jamais revue. (pp. 44–45)

Tang Meiyu [the understudy to the female lead]’s heart wavered constantly between Qian [the male lead] and me. When he [the male lead] was thrown in prison after the Gang of Four was arrested, she [the understudy] came to live with me; she went back to him when he was freed, seven years later. I never saw her again.
Before long, the protagonist is disgraced as an associate of the Gang of Four, and he tells his story from a position of neglected dotage. The novel begins and concludes with the melancholy hope that the greatness of his works may yet be recognized in the future. The bookending phrase, “dans vingt ans, je serai à nouveau un jeune homme, un brave” (in twenty years, I will be once more a young man, a gallant man; pp. 7–8, 73), is revealed in the final paragraph to be built on a quote from Lu Xun’s (1881–1936) *The True Story of Ah Q* (*A Q zhengzhuan* 阿Q正傳; serialized 1921–1922), not the first time that a line has been drawn between Lu Xun’s self-deluding protagonist and the barbarity of the Cultural Revolution.

What is Renouard, otherwise known for his translations of Conrad and Nietzsche, up to? And why the prize? It may be that the skeleton narrative, which reads almost as the treatment of a novel rather than the work itself, is meant to pay homage to or inscribe itself in either the spareness of the *nouveau roman* or else the alleged economy of Chinese writing. The constant allusiveness of the work—the protagonist’s grandfather knew Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898–1976) as well as the deposed emperor; he draws Yao Wenyan’s attention through his critique of Tao Yuanming’s 陶淵明 (365–427) *Peach Blossom Spring* ("Taohua yuan ji" 桃花源記); he precipitates (implausibly) the crippling Red Guard attack on Deng Xiaoping’s son by an article involving white rats and black rats—reads as the homework of a talented Chinese Studies undergraduate (Renouard dates the inspiration of the novel to his preparations for the history exam to enter Ecole Normale Supérieure), but it may also be meant to stress the intertextuality and the postmodernity of the novel. Since Renouard’s protagonist is given hope by what he takes to be the reception of the Revolutionary Operas in the United States during the late nineties as postmodern masterpieces, the novel may be intended to figure as its fictional equivalent, a collage of wildly disparate and not exactly probable situations. Although the protagonist is supposedly an adept of the *Jingju* 京剧 repertoire, not a single non-Revolutionary *Jingju* play is mentioned. Since there is no hint of the surreal, the reader is caught between supposition of authorial ignorance and authorial play.

Litcrit games aside, the book does not quite come off. It is too brief and too rapid to have any character or plot development, and lacks the finesse and research to be historically enlightening; so it must be judged as a parable. On these grounds it does, however, have its points. The contemporary Chinese literary establishment, for instance, has understandably not been overeager about examining the ties between the literati and political power. Nor is Renouard wrong to see in the Revolutionary Operas, their reception abroad, and their nostalgia-inspired resurgence in Mainland China, a potent source of irony. Moreover, the French readers’ context will be enriched by the rather controversial performances of the *Red Detachment*

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1 Near the end of the story, as he is about to be executed, Ah Q tries to sing a line from local opera to show his bravery. He is unable to do that, and instead shouts “Twenty years from now, I will appear again as...” 通了二十年又是一個...). Judging from the kind of things heroic figures say or sing before they are executed in traditional Chinese plays and stories, the reader can fill in the missing word as “hero” (haohan 好漢; as is done in the 1981 movie, which allows Ah Q to finish the line). This not only shows Ah Q once again failing to reach a goal he has set for himself, but also reveals that he has not learned a thing.
of Women (Hongse niangzi jun 紅色娘子軍) in major Paris theaters in 2009 and 2013. (Le Monde: “an exciting anomaly, the troupe’s revolutionary gem, created in 1964 under Mao Zedong.”) Finally, French readers may see something closer to home going on. Renouard was a close aide to and scriptwriter for prime minister François Fillon (in office 2007–12), and remarked in an interview that his Chinese protagonist could be seen as the “metempsychosis” of himself, a “counsellor in the circles which gravitate around the central power,” though he also discouraged roman à clef readings.

Renouard is on record as calling Chinese codes “subtle, and mysterious”; one may gather that policing for Orientalism has not yet reached France. This allows China to easily become the fictional world of an author who does not speak Chinese, gathers his information from secondary sources, and may never have visited the place; whether this is a positive or a doubtful development depends on one’s perspective. In any event, it is not every day that scholarship on Asian theater (in this case, by Duke University’s Liu Kang) is quoted at length in a prize-winning work of fiction, even if Renouard acknowledges that his proximate source is . . . Wikipedia.

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Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History. By James A. Benn. xiv + 290 pp. 13 illus. 8 maps. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015. Paper $24.00. Cloth $65.00.

Informed by painstaking research and illuminated by deftly structured chapters and an imaginative fire that delights in exploring seemingly disparate elements and seeking connections, this book constitutes one of the most important texts on tea culture in imperial China to come out of the English-speaking world, and provides a stellar introduction to an overlooked history.

Benn’s narrative is developed through a rich tapestry of textual sources as he explores tea as a religious and cultural commodity before the nineteenth century, when it became a permanent fixture in the global marketplace. One of the most striking themes explored in the book’s nine chapters is the role Buddhist and Taoist monastics played in the dissemination and popularization of tea—not just tea drinking, but as purveyors of tea knowledge. It details their hands-on experience in growing and processing it, how the leaf traveled with the monks (and nuns) along routes from one monastery to another, how tea spread from the monastic

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2 Rosita Boisseau, “Le ballet chinois fait le grand écart au Châtelet” (The Chinese Ballet does the splits at the Châtelet), Le Monde, September 27, 2013 http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2013/09/27/le-ballet-chinois-fait-le-grand-ecart-au-chatelet_3485758_3246.html (accessed October 28, 2015).

3 Raffael Enault, “Interview de Maël Renouard: ‘Il y a quelque chose de littéraire dans l’histoire de la Chine’” (Interview with Maël Renouard. “There is something literary about the history of China”), Roads, n.d. http://roadsmag.com/interview-de-mael-renouard-i-litteraire-lhistoire-de-la-chine45755749009871/ (accessed October 28, 2015).