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Contemporary Chinese Poetry

Hong Kong Poet Xi Xi

2019 Laureate, Newman Prize
for Chinese Literature

Maghiel van Crevel
on Chinese Migrant Workers Poetry



2012, and Liu Cixin's Remembrance of Earth's Past trilogy plus *Ball Lightning* in 2018, to be followed by many more, among which are the anthology *Broken Stars: Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction in Translation*, forthcoming in 2019, and Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide*, to be published in English in 2019, both translated by the award-winning sci-fi writer Ken Liu. Surely the most exciting era of Chinese science fiction has come, its "new wave" on the rise to sweep another decade.

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Hongmei Sun. **Transforming Monkey: Adaptation and Representation of a Chinese Epic.** Nonfiction. Seattle. University of Washington Press. 2018. 219 pages. \$90.00 USD. ISBN 9780295743189

While the study of Asian American and Chinese culture is a busy field, the intersections of myth-making and global cultures have not been adequately studied. Hongmei Sun has made a major contribution to our understanding of the complex interactions between the construction of the image of a lasting mythological hero and a culture's projection of its anxieties upon such a figure. *Transforming Monkey: Adaptation and Representation of a Chinese Epic* argues that the figure of the Monkey King shifts from a trickster, a rebel, and a demon to a revolutionary and, later, postsocialist hero. Monkey King has a major impact, according to the book, on the formation of Chinese identity across borders.

The strength of *Transforming Monkey* lies in its theoretical acumen and coherent narrative drawing together diverse materials ranging from theatrical, graphic novel, and Maoist posters to Asian American musicals. The book opens and closes with the author's astute comparison of the ways in which the trickster figure is associated with Chineseness and how Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s "signifying monkey" operates in a similar fashion in its power of representation of ethnic

cultures. Professor Sun points out that both the Monkey King and "signifying monkey" are translators of cultures and are deployed as cultural tropes for their respective cultural milieu.

The first chapter, a refresher of the trickster figure, is packed with innovative interpretations. Even for readers who are already familiar with *Journey to the West* and the better known images of Monkey King, this chapter has new things to offer, particularly how ambivalent Monkey King is in moral and political terms. The chapter suggests that Monkey King's ambivalence allows political and ethnic groups to use him as a vehicle to tell their stories. Chapter two takes us through key adaptations of the novel in pre-modern China, giving us a glimpse into historical forces that shaped the figure of Monkey King today.

One of the highlights of the book lies in chapter three, which chronicles the Maoist transformation of Monkey King into a revolutionary hero. This is a stark contrast to pre-modern constructions of Monkey King as a rascal and outlaw. The political use of Monkey King in Maoist China serves as a compelling example of how the nation-state molds popular folkloric figures to meet its political agenda.

Continuing this line of inquiry, chapter four takes into account the so-called sub-border of China, that is, the border between Hong Kong and the PRC. The focus here is on physical transformations of Monkey King, and the chapter identifies ideological links between corporeal transformations and social transformations. Appropriately, Monkey King is now a postsocialist hero. The image of Monkey King reflects and embodies the zeitgeist. One of the key observations of this chapter is Monkey King's peculiar abstinence from sexuality. Throughout the journey, "sex never constitutes a temptation" for Monkey King because "his mind cannot fathom the idea of sexuality." In the narrative's emphasis on the dichotomy of mind and body as well as the eventual harmony of mind and body, the body of Monkey King never stands in the way of spiritual transcendence. *Journey to the West*

spares no ink in describing Monkey King's body, and yet these descriptions only serve to highlight his miraculous, parentless birth, and how well suited he is for battle and transformational magic, features that different adaptors in different time periods have found universally useful.

Chapters five and six take us across the Pacific to examine Orientalism in Hollywood and Asian American literary representation. Monkey King is recast alternately as a demonic figure, a god-like figure representing justice, and a cultural shorthand for variously positive and negative versions of Chineseness. Some of the key case studies here include Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*. In Asian American narratives, the transformation of Monkey King is employed as a metaphor to discuss racial stereotypes and immigrant identities.

The book steers clear of various pitfalls of adaptation studies, such as narratives of a "linear development of the evolution" of an icon or story. Professor Sun embraces the disparate nature of transpacific adaptations of Monkey King, acknowledges the limited scope of her project in analyzing a selection of the most prominent rewritings, and helps us see the rich interstitial space among seemingly disconnected adaptations. Given the diversity of cases and materials the book attempts to analyze, it could be a challenge to organize the chapters for both sufficient coverage and an easy-to-follow structure. *Transforming Monkey* emerges triumphantly.

The book makes a welcome contribution to a growing field of transpacific cultural studies that includes *The Avant-Garde and the Popular in Modern China: Tian Han and the Intersection of Performance and Politics* by Liang Luo; *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* by Andrew Coe; and Liang's forthcoming project, *The Legend of the White Snake: From Folk Tales to Popular Culture*.

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Transforming Monkey: Adaptation and Representation of a Chinese Epic

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chinese literature in review

Mingwei Song and Theodore Hutters, eds. **The Reincarnated Giant: An Anthology of Twenty-First-Century Chinese Science Fiction.** New York City. Columbia University Press. 2018. 448 pages. \$35.00 USD. ISBN 9780231180238

With Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* in English translation winning the Hugo Award for Best Novel and his *Death's End* making it onto the *New York Times* bestseller list, a Chinese "sci-fi invasion" of the United States (in the words of a *Wall Street Journal* report) seems to be truly underway. Liu, of course, is not alone in his entry into the United States; he is joined by a growing body of sci-fi writers from the Sinophone world, making the rise of Chinese science fiction visible even in English-speaking communities.

As yet, another proof of this golden age of Chinese science fiction, *The Reincarnated Giant*, co-edited by Mingwei Song and Theodore Hutters, presents fifteen enthralling pieces by thirteen authors, made available in beautiful English by eighteen translators. It has grown out of a 2012 special issue of *Renditions*, a journal of Chinese literature in English translation, and is the third English-language anthology of Chinese science fiction, following the 1989 volume *Science Fiction from China*, edited by Dingbo Wu and Patrick Murphy, and *Invisible Planets: Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction in Translation*, translated by Ken Liu, and released in 2016. The contributors to *The Reincarnated Giant* are from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and include both big names such as Liu Cixin and newcomers

such as La La, whose work is translated into English for the first time. Their works are envisioned by Mingwei Song to constitute a "new wave" of Chinese science fiction, which, as Song puts it, "has become a fresh new force that is helping shape the outlook of global science fiction."

The subjects of these short stories and excerpts range from spatial expeditions and interstellar wars to dystopias and posthuman ethics. They are grouped into three parts to showcase the imaginings of "other realities," "other us," and "other futures," but the categories also overlap. "The Village Schoolteacher," one of Liu Cixin's most important short stories, merges the boundaries of realism and fantasy by switching between the sickbed of a village schoolteacher and the flagship of an alien fleet engaged in an intergalactic war. The story builds toward its climactic moment, when the schoolteacher's instruction on Newton's three laws enables his students to pass the aliens' civilization test, saving Earth from destruction. On a smaller scale, Chen Qiufan's "Balin" explores the possibilities of empathy across life forms and reminds us that the self-proclaimed civilized humans may have yet to learn compassion from species and races deemed primitive and, therefore, less human than "us." While most of the stories imagine various futures, some in particular embed the past in their futurist visions, as is the case with Baoshu's "Song of Ancient Earth," an apocalyptic tale of the devastating revolutionary tradition in the far future. Similarly, in Han Song's "Regenerated Bricks,"

when an intelligent brick is invented by mixing human remains with construction debris from the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, the "future" the architect tries to envisage is forever haunted by the traumatic memories of the past.

Besides the futuristic and otherworldly, what this anthology has to offer is science fiction as "Chinese" in its broad sense. There are, for example, excerpts from the Hong Kong writer Dung Kai-cheung's *Histories of Time: The Luster of Mute Porcelain* and Taiwanese writer Egoyan Zheng's *The Dream Devourer*. The former novel employs an intricate narrative structure to reflect on the history of post-1997 Hong Kong, whereas the latter alludes to the confused identity of Taiwan through the life of a double agent. The anthology's title story, by engineer Wang Jinkang, describes the frenetic growth of a tycoon's "reincarnated" body after he receives brain transplantation. It has been read as a grotesque allegory of China's development into an economic and technological super power.

To sum up, this collection is worth the attention of all who are interested in the science fiction genre, in contemporary Chinese literature, and even in China's rise as a great economy and technological innovator. It is also important because it has joined other volumes to mark a prosperous decade in Chinese literary history, one that has witnessed a bumper crop of English translations of Chinese science fiction, including John Chan's *The Fat Years* in 2011, Dung Kai-cheung's *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City* in