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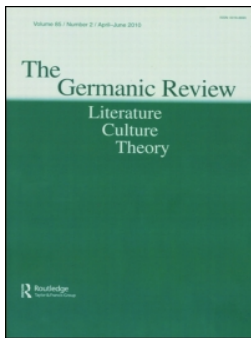
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Book Reviews

Bettina Brandt and Daniel Leonhard Purdy, eds. *China in the German Enlightenment*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 210 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4426-4845-6

There are presumably few jacket illustrations of an academic book that are as revealing of its content as the one gracing this handsome volume: a 1730 chinoiserie beer mug floating against the background of bright yellow. Bright yellow, of course, is the color of China, always favored by its imperial rulers. The images on the porcelain mug—the floral ornamentation, the fabulous birds, and the human figures in vaguely Chinese clothing but with body forms and facial features that the ceramic designer apparently had difficulty lending a truly Chinese look—bespeak a lively, if oddly stilted, imagination. With all its artistic finesse, the mug is an object with a practical use: now on display in the Bavarian National Museum, it was originally a specimen of the utensil indispensable for Bavarians in enjoying their favorite foamy beverage. The jacket illustration, then, encapsulates the main theme of the volume: in the age of the Enlightenment, Germans were intensely interested in China, and their representations of China were highly imaginative and served practical functions.

The book collects eight remarkably coherent essays by historians, philosophers, and Germanists. In their lucid introduction, the editors first offer a preview of the general tenor of the essays:

They demonstrate how over a period of 150 years European intellectuals switched from admiring China as a utopian place of wonder to treating China disdainfully as a despotic state and argue that German philosophy from Gottfried Leibniz to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel participated in this dramatic reversal. Finally, these essays make clear that the shifting status of Chinese thought in Europe had little to do with China itself but everything to do with Europe's expanding economic, military, and media channels between the two regions. (2).

Then the editors locate these essays in the history of scholarship from Donald Lach's monumental nine-volume *Asia in the Making of Europe* (1965–1993) to the applications of Edward Said's thesis about Orientalism to German-language representations of Asia, as well as the subsequent debates about the adequacy of Said, discourse analysis, and postcolonial theory to the issue at hand. Against the background of existing scholarship, the editors highlight the specific contributions that the volume seeks to make: it revisits the Enlightenment adaptation of “[the] Jesuit project to blend Confucianism, Christianity, and ancient

philosophy”; it traces the emergence of modern race theory in the late Enlightenment and “shows how the history of race theory in German philosophy is still being written today”; and, finally, it shows that “contemporary German Studies has incorporated postcolonial theory to such an extent that scholars now are able to employ its analytical tools and lines of interrogation without having to repeat the old question: how German is it?” (9–10). The ambition of the volume, then, resides not so much in breaking new theoretical ground as in painting a more nuanced picture of the German representations of China, a picture that, in turn, sheds new light on German philosophy from Leibniz to Hegel and uncovers the beginnings of race theory.

If one had to come up with a generic category to characterize the essays collected in the volume, it would surely be that of history of ideas. We encounter the heavyweights in German intellectual history—Leibniz, Herder, Goethe, Hegel, Buber—as well as some lesser figures who either provided materials or who served as sounding boards for the great philosophers. China was of interest to these philosophers because it performed a specific function in their respective philosophical system. Leibniz, whose ethics revolves around the concept of “charity of the wise,”¹ lauds the Chinese sages for their practical wisdom while seeing in them a deficit in theoretical speculation. The eighteenth-century thinkers Buffon, Blumenbach, and Kant needed the Chinese to invent a theory of race based on a spectrum of skin colors ranging from the white European to the black African. In this regard, Walter Demel’s essay “How the Chinese Became Yellow: A Contribution to the Early History of Race Theories,” translated from German by the editors themselves, is especially illuminating. Most significantly perhaps, the Enlightenment dogma of progress and the philosophy of history that emerged in the decades around 1800 invoked China to serve as the intermediate stage in their scheme of historical time advancing from savagery to the “true” civilization embodied by the Europeans. It was the philosophy of history that contributed most to the switch from admiration to disdain in the European, particularly German, perception of China. That the China in the historico-philosophical scheme has little to do with reality is made amply clear by Robert Bernasconi’s contribution “China on Parade: Hegel’s Manipulation of His Sources and His Change of Mind,” an essay that shows the great philosopher’s nonchalant—indeed, disingenuous—treatment of the material about China in his speculative system-building. That China is somehow made to perform certain functions in philosophical systems is an overarching argument developed in varying ways by the individual essays in the volume. Theoretically, this conclusion challenges Said’s explanation of Orientalism in terms of colonial power relations. The most interesting thing about the German interest in China is that Germany was not a colonial power and China was not a colony.

Not all essays in the volume fall in the category of history of ideas. Michael Carhart’s “Leibniz between Paris, Grand Tartary, and the Far East: Gerbillon’s Intercepted Letter” tells a thrilling story of the fragile network of communication in the early modern world, which furnished the polymath of Hannover with information about the remote Middle Kingdom. Birgit Tautz’s “Localizing China: Of Knowledge, Genres, and German Literary Historiography” provides an overview of the various generic forms of the representation of China in the

¹ See Patrick Riley, *Leibniz’ Universal Jurisprudence: Justice as the Charity of the Wise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

German Enlightenment. John Noyes's "Eradicating the Orientalists: Goethe's *Chinesisch-deutsche Jahres- und Tageszeiten*" sheds light on the use of China by the aging *Dichterst* as a cipher for his aesthetic program.

After reading these well-crafted essays, we cannot help feeling the gratification afforded by new historical knowledge. One is reminded once again of the insatiable curiosity that peoples from all over the world show for each other. To be sure, this curiosity often leads to unfair judgments, but it also spawns valuable insights. This is as true today as it was two or three centuries ago.

CHENXI TANG

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Robin Curtis and Angelica Fenner, eds. *The Autobiographical Turn in Germanophone Documentary and Experimental Film*. Rochester, NY: Camden, 2014. 342 pp. ISBN 9781571139177

Over the past decades, the political, social, cultural, and economic relationships underlying the production, distribution, and reception of cinema have changed considerably, both in the German-speaking world and on a global scale. German film scholars have frequently reflected and theorized the new parameters of what was conventionally considered a "German national cinema." Yet there is still a need for a deeper and broader reflection on how the changing conditions of filmmaking and consumption have transformed—and should be allowed to further transform—the disciplinary conventions and theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of German film studies. This question is particularly pertinent for German film scholars working in North America, where vital critical debates on a variety of aspects of German cinema are often informed by and subjugated to the pedagogical demands of a German language and culture-centered curriculum. Theoretical questions pertaining to the specificity of contemporary German film are rarely extended beyond the cluster of problems that have traditionally arisen from the (arguably defunct) notion of a "national cinema." The majority of recent publications are thus contributions to debates inherent to the political and cultural landscape of German cinema studies: some problematize and take a critical stance toward heritage and period films that engage with Germany's conflicted past while conforming to mainstream cinematic conventions, whereas others seek to emphasize and to theorize the kinds of progressive narratives underlying these films. Ultimately, these efforts remain caught in the orthodoxies of a national cinema-based German film studies.

Robin Curtis and Angelica Renner's edited volume *The Autobiographical Turn in Germanophone Documentary and Experimental Film* fills an important gap in the field. Conceived as a "systematic study of the mediatization of the autobiographical mode" (1), the volume effectively charts a new course for German film studies that would allow it to