
Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker. *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant "Other" in Modern Chinese Literature*. Stanford University Press, 1998. 321p.

CHRISTOPHER LUPKE
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

Feuerwerker's study provides a broad understanding of modern Chinese literature while remaining true to its thematic goal, analyzing the modern intellectual's depiction of the peasantry, a relationship "forever oppositional yet inextricably interlocked" (6). Her thesis is that Chinese writers throughout the twentieth century have been fascinated with representing their illiterate counterparts located in the countryside. Focusing on this theme implicitly allows Chinese literature to be viewed not as a pale version of Western literature, forever in search of ways it too can partake in writing the universal human condition, but as something that has its own peculiar dynamic. The intellectual self/peasant other representational matrix may exist in other literary traditions, but it is not one we foremost associate with the West. This book is a wonderful general introduction to the subject even as it succeeds in delivering many nuanced readings of specific texts. The themes are clear, but the savvy exposition prevents it from collapsing into a procrustian meditation. Feuerwerker accomplishes this by giving each generation its full due, since each approaches this problem of representation somewhat differently.

Little scholarship has been written on this key theme until now. Only with the advent of poststructural theory have critics begun to behold the ideological scaffolding for what it is. *Ideology, Power, Text* predicates itself upon theories of linguistic and cultural theory, yet is surprisingly free of jargon, extensive references to metatheorists, or tendentious debate. This will come to many as a relief, but it should not suggest Feuerwerker is naive about theory. She simply chooses to eschew the heavy-handedness involved in employing it. Nevertheless, the limpid quality of the book does raise questions about how deep the author goes into the enigma of representation.

Feuerwerker's first chapter, ideal for the non-specialist, surveys the evolution of the modern intellectual from the premodern Confucian literati. It discusses the traditional bifurcation between "mental" and "physical" laborers. A privileged position has always been afforded to the intellectual, and in fact the "ladder of success" in traditional China has been through literacy, a Confucian education, and a battery of examinations and degrees. China was essentially a meritocracy. Those who worked with their bodies, by contrast, were relegated to a subservient level, as were women. Feuerwerker observes that according to Confucian precepts

good will among the ordinary people must be maintained for the emperor to hold this “mandate of heaven.” How this mandate is determined rests with the educated elite’s ability to “read” heaven’s omens, which translates into interpreting the will of the common people. Feuerwerker delineates these issues with clarity and pith, setting the context for the modern form of this “grammatocracy.” The modern incarnation consists of an intelligentsia, most often Western educated, in contrast to a new class of the “peasantry.” One addition that could improve Feuerwerker’s otherwise excellent first chapter would be an explanation of the May Fourth Movement: May 4th, 1919 when demonstrations were staged at Tiananmen protesting the Treaty of Versailles. Scholars of postcolonial and commonwealth literatures may be interested to know that China was among those who suffered from this ill-crafted testament of colonialism. The identity crisis that spawned the May Fourth Movement was responsible for motivating intellectuals to revitalize the national culture of China.

Chapter two continues laying the thematic groundwork, highlighting the importance of the linguistic revolution. This is important information since modern writers shifted almost entirely from writing in classical Chinese to a vernacular idiom. Feuerwerker discusses Hu Shi’s contribution as well as that of the Marxist theorist Qu Qiubai, subsequently executed, and then she moves to the imposition of Maoist restrictions on literature. This is the chapter where one would expect deeper discussion of theoretical issues and themes. One wonders whether Foucaultian discourse theory might help in theorizing the problem of representing the peasantry in intellectual discourse or whether Gramsci’s notion of hegemony could show how control was exerted over the peasantry by means other than force.

Feuerwerker’s discussion of Lu Xun in the third chapter, the doyen of modern writers, is one of the best in English. Feuerwerker discusses Lu Xun’s use of the I-narrator and his fictional peasant encounters. Her readings include “Old Home,” which relates the communication gap between the intellectual narrator and his childhood peasant friend. In it, the narrator recalls his youthful excursions with the peasant boy, for example when they hunt for “zha.” “Zha” is a Chinese character the meaning of which no one is quite sure. Though Feuerwerker dismisses it with a whimsical “whatever that is” (81), the use of this character with no referent underscores the lack of referentiality available for language that attempts to describe the inaccessible reaches of peasant reality. “New Year’s Sacrifice” features an illiterate peasant who confronts the narrator with a question about the afterlife and dies shortly thereafter. Feuerwerker’s detailed reading of the narrative indi-

cates how the work actually is about the impossibility of writing peasant reality itself.

The next generation of writers whom Feuerwerker discusses are those who enact the Maoist aesthetic with writings for, about, and, many still think, by the peasantry; however, as Feuerwerker's exposé reveals, Zhao Shuli, the prime example, turns out to have arisen as an "intellectual of the feudal class" (114) educated by a member of the traditional scholar elite. Feuerwerker's findings, based on readings of recent Chinese-language scholarship, call into question Zhao's status as a "peasant writer." Her thoughtful readings also demonstrate that, far from being a writer who articulates the perspective of the peasantry, Zhao actually inserts considerable Communist party jargon into his descriptions of country folk. Employing this "partyspeak" had readers imagining this was authentic peasant language rather than a discourse inculcated into them. Feuerwerker neither outright condemns his writing as soporific and doctrinaire nor praises Zhao for being "authentic." She also notes Zhao blurs the distinction between realism (literature based on the lives of peasants) and romanticism (the need to articulate pre-ordained ideological goals of what their lives should be).

Chapter five explores Gao Xiaosheng, an intellectual sent down to the countryside for re-education and forced to "become" a peasant. His most important writings appeared as the Maoist Era ended. Gao's work has invited comparisons both to Lu Xun and Zhao Shuli. Fresh from the countryside and able to "tell it like it was" (146), Gao was reminiscent of Zhao's "authenticity"; as a writer whose irony and satire created a tension between verbal play and historical testimony (149-150), Gao was indebted to Lu Xun. Feuerwerker shows how his stories graft the intellectual's narrative voice into the thought process of the peasant, even while the peasant's thoughts are imbued with party jargon. Many of Gao's peasants are seen as "followers," trusting in the party yet barely subsisting (164). Little progress occurs in their character development. Feuerwerker's impressive readings include that of "Liu Yu Writes a Book," where a self-absorbed writer with a (misdiagnosed) terminal illness composes feverishly while his wife works in the fields. Ironically, his wife dies from exhaustion while he lives on. The story recalls Mencius' division of power and suggestively equates the female with the exploited peasant.

The final chapter focuses on writers of the 1980s. The three writers whom Feuerwerker selects, Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, and Wang Anyi, have all been associated with the "seeking roots" (*xungen*) movement which has become "a vehicle for questioning the present and a source of renewed creative energy" as the writers search for what is "enduring, primal, and ahistorical" in China (193). In these works, the peasantry is considered the "primal bedrock" of culture. Feuerwerker

appropriates the term “historiographical metacriticism” from Linda Hutcheon to describe the way “historical and social grounding” sit uneasily “alongside self-reflexology” (201). The “seeking roots” writers themselves have been exposed to a profusion of poststructural and postmodern ideas from the West. This profusion has influenced their work as they have sought to craft the textual means to examine the peasant in a new light. Han Shaogong’s characters, for example, are often fractured selves whose “lack of coherent, autonomous subjecthood” (210) is emblematic of the intellectual’s continued difficulty in representing rural brethren. Mo Yan’s work renders grotesque subject matter in lyrical fashion. His depiction of peasant brutality undercuts their idealization, and could be a metaphorical search for the self. Feuerwerker ends with an examination of Wang Anyi’s “Baotown.” She provides a thorough reading of the various characters who include a peasant writer, an orphan girl betrothed as a child bride, a wanderer who lives with a widow in Baotown, and the inimitable “Dregs,” a boy wonder whose investiture as a socialist hero constitutes the pinnacle of irony. Her reading is only marred by a confusing typographical error where the peasant writer Renwen is repeatedly referred to as Bingwen (234).

The book concludes with an assessment of the present situation and speculations about the future, suggesting that the current preference for urban subject matter indicates intellectuals are held in disrepute. I have only two reservations about this excellent study. First, to achieve clarity and perhaps avoid sinological criticisms of over-theorization, Feuerwerker sacrifices the depth that would accompany a more abstract approach. Her eschewal results in an inability to examine the larger picture, the impact of globalization on subjectivity and representation. What remains to be theorized is the emergence of an individual subjectivity, courtesy the West, that creates a crisis in Chinese subjectivity and leads to the split so often seen not just in mainland authors but in those such as Wang Wenxing in Taiwan as well.

Subjectivity becomes a popular trope for Chinese writers in the twentieth century for the same reasons it does in other non-Western national literatures: The West’s enormous influence does not stop with politics; it entails an epistemological imbalance too. Chinese writers see the West as a model used to replace the “feudal” vestiges of traditional subjectivity. That these writers are complicit in this intellectual imbalance of power adds a layer to the issue of alterity. But Feuerwerker inexplicably leaves out the foreign element in the problem of the “other.” It is precisely this intellectual incursion that precipitates the emergence of the illiterate peasant, the “true native” who can *stand* for China even though she cannot speak for herself. Then there is the concomitant issue of readership and the long-

ing with which Chinese intellectuals have eyed the Nobel Prize, recently awarded to Gao Xingjian. This desire for “recognition” has arrived only when prominent critics in the West have read Gao’s excursions into the Chinese countryside as part of the universal human condition—the themes and characters, though somehow “different in particulars,” are still essentially “recognized” as “the same as us.” Feuerwerker doesn’t emphasize enough the big picture of Western influence and the power of this readership to interpellate these unique works into its own mainstream discourse. She also doesn’t fully convey the artifice that the *idea* of the peasantry is a trope, dependent upon and part of an intellectual discourse whose “real” signified “out there” is fictitious. The peasantry has functioned as a canvas painted upon to serve intellectual interests. Peasants do not “speak”: their actions and words are constructed in language by *their* others, the intellectuals.

Secondly, this work could be improved by including Taiwan writers, many of whom depict country folk. During the Maoist Era, three decades of Chinese literature was subject to censorship, divorcing it from the May Fourth tradition. Chinese literature from Taiwan, though, has continued some May Fourth themes. Zhang Ailing, through works such as *Rice Sprout Song*, was influential in Taiwan. Banned in China for years, her work now is influential there on writers like Wang Anyi. What comparisons can be made between mainland and Taiwan writers? This question is never asked because Feuerwerker’s *own* representation of (mainland) China does not permit it. These criticisms aside, this is a book of great value to anyone interested in Third World literature as well as China experts. ✨