

American Studies Across the Pacific: Music, Film, and Literature

Reprise Editor's Note

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When I was asked to be a guest editor of this edition of *Reprise*, I set out to explore what to me is the most fascinating avenue in the field of Transnational American Studies, that is, the ways in which the United States has been perceived and translated within the diverse contexts of Asia, and more specifically, China. As this issue celebrates the literary contributions of Chinese-Malaysian American writer, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Reprise* here offers an interview with the poet, conducted by JTAS Editor-in-Chief, Nina Morgan, in 1999, and previously published in India in Somdatta Mandal's *The Diasporic Imagination: Asian American Writing, Vol. 1 Interviews and Creative Writing* (Prestige Books, 2000). In the interview, Lim shares with us the inspiration behind her book of poetry, *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (1998), charting her journey of "relocating" herself from being a Malaysian writer at a younger age to "a diasporic Malaysian or Asian writer" in California as a daughter, mother, and feminist. The "power of agency" that she articulates in her work finds continued expressions in the "deliberative process of identification," often through the "intersectional space" between the US and Asia, a space she frequently straddles. Such a conscientious "act of recognition, acknowledging where one finds oneself" is indeed what gives Lim's beautiful body of work such a unique literary consciousness.

Next, this section turns attention to the transnational relations between the United States and China. Despite historical confrontations and continued tension, the two nations have an equally rich impact on how they inform and inspire one another's cultural and literary legacies. *Reprise* here addresses this topic by bringing together three pieces of writing that examine the place and imagination of the United States in contemporary China in the realms of literature, music, and film: First, Yu Jianhua's introduction to *A Companion to American Literature*, originally published as *美国文学大辞典* (2005), a compilation of American writers and their works in Chinese with commentaries by Chinese scholars that he coedited with a team of more than thirty scholars

across China through a decade's effort; second, Stacilee Ford's "Blockbuster Dreams: Chimericanization in *American Dreams in China* and *Finding Mr. Right*," which examines the agency that Chinese blockbusters take in subverting the Hollywood formula in regard to Asian masculinity and the recent notion of the "Chinese Dream"; and third, Teng Jimeng's "Lost in Translation? Transnational American Rock Music of the Sixties and Its Misreading in 1980s China," which interrogates the impact of the American protest music of the 1960s on China's rock music movement in the 1980s.

In 2005, Beijing's Commercial Press published *A Companion to American Literature*, edited by Yu Jianhua and Chinese scholars across twenty-six Chinese institutions. Translated into and commented on in Chinese, the three and a half million-word volume comprises commentaries on works by well-known American authors, literary critics, and historians, as well as introductions to prominent literary journals, awards, and movements over three centuries of American literary history. Unlike literature anthologies published in the United States, such as the *Encyclopedia of American Literature* (2008) edited by Susan Clair Imbarrato, et al., and *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* (2004) edited by Jay Parini and Phillip W. Leininger, Yu maintains that his *Companion* is "uniquely" tailored for Chinese readers, students, and scholars of American literature in terms of its scope and dimension. For instance, the *Companion* brings to the fore a number of writers who are otherwise neglected in the mainstream American literary scene due to their radical thoughts and socialist leanings—Howard Fast, Jack London, and Pearl S. Buck are just a few who enjoy wide popularity in China, and whose works are frequently translated into Chinese.

Another example of the kind of literary work featured in the *Companion* are the Chinese poems written by Chinese detainees in Angel Island at a time when the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882–1943) was in full force. While largely unfamiliar to readers in the US, these poems are included in the *Companion* "not only as a valuable record of early immigration history, but also as works of high aesthetic values." Pointing to "a clear bend toward a different reading group [a Chinese readership] than readers in the United States" in the selection of entries, Yu speaks of the higher proportion of Asian American and female authors as well as works by US ethnic minorities in the volume. The effort to include these writers is, as Yu puts it, "an attempt to rebalance the more or less Eurocentric and androcentric tendencies in the layout of the American literary canon." For the above reasons, the selection process itself had become "a sort of cultural dialogue" that demanded "comparison, rethinking, negotiation, and readjustment" across a range of cross-cultural issues. With the vibrant translation industry of foreign literature and enthusiastic student majors in foreign languages in recent years, Yu believes that "it would probably not be wrong to assume that in China there are more people interested in American literature than any other foreign literature." In 2017, *Wenhui Daily* featured an interview with Yu, with further details about the *Companion* available on this website; and a bilingual list of authors featured in the *Companion* is also reprinted here at the end of Yu's introduction.

Another competitive avenue that has garnered critical attention in post-Mao China are major studio films from the US. With Hollywood's pervasive influence in China, as Stacilee Ford argues in "Blockbuster Dreams: Chimericization in *American Dreams in China* and *Finding Mr. Right*," recent Chinese blockbusters themselves wield economic and cultural clout in their competitiveness against Hollywood in ways that satisfy "an ever younger and increasingly affluent viewing audience" around the world. These coproduction films, also known as *da pian*, "constitute a 'next generation' archive of cultural memory and social history in a time of rapid change" in their articulation of an increasingly globalized and transnational China. These *da pian*, as Ford insightfully argues, allow for the reconstruction of the notion of transnational Chinese masculinity, disrupting the "highly Orientalized, desexualized, or hypermasculinized Asian men in Hollywood films." Many of the male figures, also dubbed SNAGs (sensitive new Asian guys), are keen participants in the "contemporary redemption of China as it rises." Their upward social mobility is evident in their easy movements outside of China, particularly in the United States, "where they articulate their views on a new world order" in what Niall Ferguson characterized as the "Chimericizing" world.¹

Peter Chan's *American Dreams in China* and Xue Xiaolu's *Finding Mr. Right* (both released in 2013) are examples of what Ford observes as the "growing arsenal of informal Chinese soft power in the cultural sphere." These films are in one way or another engaging with Xi Jinping's notion of the Chinese dream as they portray, in Ford's words, "the ways in which upwardly-mobile Mainlanders are claiming the physical space of the United States as a natural consequence of claiming 'imagined America' via popular culture, particularly Hollywood movies." More crucially still, it is "China rather than the United States" where characters find more opportunities to achieve their dreams. The male leads, in particular, dismantle "US notions of orientalism and exceptionalism" as they articulate "national and cultural belonging that 'right' historical wrongs" and assert "China's power as an economic and cultural force." They offer examples of "what it means to live one's own 'Chinese Dream,' which unashamedly borrows 'bits of America' to represent and redeem the 'new' China."

Teng Jimeng's "Lost in Translation? Transnational American Rock Music of the Sixties and Its Misreading in 1980s China" presents a discussion that can be related to both Yu's and Ford's by delving into the transnational route that US protest music from the tumultuous sixties took to post-Mao China. In the article, Teng offers fascinating insights on the music scene emerging in the sixties that witnessed not only the revival of folk but its fusion with the complex history and soundscape of soul and roots in the music of Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Phil Ochs, Joan Baez, and Judy Collins, among others. What eventually became a sensational global culture is a music that would have a profound impact on the rock music movement in China in the 80s. The appropriation of US protest music in China, as Teng reminds us, was not achieved "simply by translating the American experience into Chinese culture," but also "by translating the

political messages of the United States of the 1960s into the social movements and political struggles of China in the 1980s.” The deeply unsettling social and political conditions in China in the eighties, with double-digit inflation and intellectuals’ calls for freedom of the press, to name a few, prompted a wave of Chinese underground music that was not only “oppositional, or at least, non-conformist,” but also “independent, and suspicious of commercial values and resistant to attempts at cooperation.”

The lack of vision of the state-run music industry in China, Teng maintains, certainly prompted a burgeoning youth culture to look for an alternative music in the post-Mao era. The music career of Cui Jian was one such example. Formerly a trumpet player for a state-run orchestra, as Teng tells us, Cui eventually pushed his career to new heights by experimenting with rock and roll. His songs, such as “Nothing to My Name” (1986) and “Like a Knife” (1991) took the Chinese music scene by storm. The “localization” of the global US music scene in China, Teng argues, “resulted in a movement whereby Chinese traditions were mobilized” as Chinese musicians “decontextualized and disembodied” American song lyrics into the Chinese historical context. “Nowhere else in East Asia was the diffusion of American rock music produced in the Sixties given such a political coloration as in China,” Teng continues, “and nowhere else was a self-consciously progressive music organized as effectively as in China.” Although the movement did not succeed in arbitrating major political changes, Teng concludes that it still “played an important role in the making of a new sensibility and consciousness.”

Finally, Ford’s and Teng’s chapters are excerpted from Priscilla Roberts’s *The Power of Culture: Encounters Between China and the United States* (2016)—the latest of the five volumes of essays that she meticulously edited for US–China Education Trust’s American Studies Network annual meetings over the course of eleven years. These titles are, in chronological order, *Bonds Across Borders: Women, China, and International Relations in the Modern World* (coedited with He Peiqun, 2007), *Bridging the Sino-American Divide: American Studies with Chinese Characteristics* (2007), *China Views Nine Eleven: Essays in Transnational American Studies* (coedited with Mei Renyi and Yan Xunhua, 2011), and *Going Soft? The US and China Go Global* (2014). The overwhelming number of chapters that Roberts edited and coedited underscores an important foundation that she has paved for us not only concerning discussions of Sino-US relations over wide-ranging topics, but also the very active scene of American Studies in China itself involving, as of 2019, seventy-three member institutions across the nation. As a scholar of Transnational American Studies myself and as someone who has taught and researched in Hong Kong, Mainland China, Germany, and the United States on topics of race and slavery, as well as the reception and translation of US writers in China, I have greatly benefited from the depth and breadth of Roberts’s work.

Notes

¹ As Ford points out, “Chimerica” is a term coined by Niall Ferguson. See Ferguson, “Niall Ferguson Says U.S.-China Cooperation is Critical to Global Economic Health,” *The Washington Post*, November 17, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/16/AR2008111601736.html>.