

Zhong Xueping, *Mainstream Culture Refocused: Television Drama, Society, and the Production of Meaning in Reform-Era China*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2010, pp. X+219

Zhong Xueping is very correct in reminding that television drama are extremely important for understanding what is happening to culture in society. She is also to be thanked for bringing in the fore the so-called mainstream, or popular, culture. Some would argue that such a popular expression so rarely, produces real artistic works in any esthetic field that it can be neglected, or can only be studied for its sociological meanings. It is true that all the aspects of culture, be it high or low, does reflect something of the producing society, but that does not give justice to art; it smacks of functionalism in a poor, reducing way. On the opposite, art for art's sake may be contended as an illusion.

Actually, Zhong Xueping does not enter the debate. She aims at a better understanding of contemporary Chinese mainstream (popular) culture, adding that this culture is "unabashedly tied to social concerns." (p.3) Then she raises her main concern: the understanding of televisual representational implications, specifically of melodrama as dominant genre, in recent experiences of Chinese society. This is written in the first pages of the introduction, which, the reader is warned, is somewhat abstract. Indeed...as well as many pages of the book. The style of the author does not help to make her analysis and conclusion clearer. The frequent use of words stressing uncertainty, like complexity, tension, dialectic, although sometimes necessary add, to the fog covering minute analysis. One may regret this all the more because most presentations of television drama are well chosen and significant.

Each chapter of the book has a rather long title explaining enough the focus or conclusion of the analysis. Ch. 1 presents films with television as a main ingredient of the plot. Ch. 2 speaks of the return on emperors in television drama. As a subtitle expresses it, re-collecting emperors as heroes may well be ambivalent. (p.57) The main significance of such drama has to do with historical consciousness in contemporary China (p.65). Anti-corruption theme is explored in Ch. 3. The story of "Sued by the State" or "Red Carnations", are well retold. In concluding her analysis, Zhong Xueping goes to say, that stories mainly focus on good and bad officials, and do not fully recognize that the right of ordinary people as the source of legitimacy that provide the right for the existing power structure to continue to exist. (p.96)

Ch. 4 on youth drama comes to a conclusion which seems to be widely repeated and accepted: there is a deep desire for "meaning", without clear indication about what should constitute that meaning. Probably, the "circular structure of this desire for meaning is already part of the answer by promoting personal virtues (p.121-122).

“Women, desire & the ideology of happiness” is the title of the intriguing Ch. 4. Ambivalence, there again, but forcefully, is a key word to understand what women desire, and their definition of happiness. The author asks the question: Why happiness is assumed to be particularly important to women in a post-women’s-liberation age”? The importance given to marriage and family as constitutive of happiness, does not fill satisfactorily the concept. As the author writes, these dramas provide ground for further discussion and debate. (p.143)

An obvious conclusion which is more or less repeated in each chapter of the “complex” book and studies! The author differently says it again when she mentions “a theme that implicitly runs through the book, namely the changing relationship between mainstream culture and the role of intellectual” in china today (p.163) With this in mind an ordinary reader could read again the book and discover what could have been more plainly said along the chapters. A second reading may also help to overcome the difficulties encounter at first, perhaps because of the subtle, sophisticated style of the author. Hopefully, the reader will want to pay more attention to television drama for what they are: verbal and visual images to tell entertaining and meaningful stories.

In this line, Ch. 6 deserves special notice as it present “song composed for television drama”. Since the dramas presented by Zhong Xueping were well received and debated, their accompanying songs have become popular poetry and folk music, and merit special studies. As well as the techniques used for mise-en scene and filming, only slightly touched in the book (see, for example, pp. 43-44, 102, 107). Many other aspects of mainstream culture as manifold in the production and reception of TV drama could have been touched; the author is aware of that: financial aspect, administrative constraints, political surveillance...The book is already very rich and could probably not deal with more facets of its subject matter. Yet, even if intellectual’s changing role in China (p.19) is one of the main issue addressed, these intellectuals cannot neglect the fact that these drama were produced to be images enjoyed by a large public on the screen of their TV set.