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Review of Asian Fusion: New Encounters in the Asian-German Avant-Garde

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Qinna Shen

Review of *Asian Fusion: New Encounters in the Asian-German Avant-Garde*. By Caroline Rupprecht. New York: Peter Lang, 2020. xii + 264 pages + 4 b/w images.

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Since its inception at the 2009 GSA conference, Asian German studies has provided a transnational and comparative framework and inspired new directions of research, such as Caroline Rupprecht's excellent book *Asian Fusion: New Encounters in the Asian-German Avant-Garde*. In six case studies with a conceptually innovative call-and-response structure, Rupprecht juxtaposes three postwar male German authors/ artists (W.G. Sebald, Peter Weiss, Joseph Beuys) with three female Asian-German authors (Yoko Tawada, Pham Thi Hoài, Anna Kim), creating imaginary but productive intergenerational "dialogues." Integrating "writing back" (as in *The Empire Writes Back*) into her approach, Rupprecht allows the voices of these Asian German authors to "respond" or "write back" to the German authors' "calls" (14–15). She notes that she does not establish a hierarchy between the two groups of authors, unlike other "writing back" projects that construct a dialogue between colonizer and subaltern. It is, however, clear that Rupprecht is primarily critical of the German authors and writes with adoration and admiration for the Asian-German authors, putting the latter in an advantageous subject position. Except for Tawada, Asian German authors have not received much public or scholarly attention. Some of their works are examined in depth for the first time here.

In Part I, Rupprecht demonstrates that Sebald's and Tawada's works are similarly interested in architecture and space, particularly empty, liminal, and "in-between" space, both in the physical and linguistic sense. Sebald establishes a comparison between sericulture in the Qing court under the Empress Dowager and the sericulture of Nazi Germany, literally and metaphorically considering the silkworms as an analogue to the human lives destroyed in China and in Nazi Germany. The silkworm cocoons in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) resemble the empty Fort Breendonk in Belgium portrayed in *Austerlitz* (2001), today a Gestapo prison museum, with silkworms as stand-ins for the victims of Auschwitz. Whereas Rupprecht embraces Sebald's/Austerlitz's subjective projection of historical memory onto objects, she criticizes Sebald's extremely negative portrayal of the Empress Dowager Cixi. A similar feminist critique of the traditional characterization of Cixi is offered in Jung Chang's book *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (2013).

Indirectly, Tawada reinforces the ontological "emptiness" of subjects that Austerlitz senses in himself. For Tawada, the empty, "in-between" space is hieroglyphically embodied in the kanji character for the Zen Buddhist concept *ma*. She further deconstructs the Kantian philosophy of the "subject" and rationalism by invoking the Japanese words for "I" and "self," which do not indicate a coherent "subject." Tawada's work thus constitutes a "negation of a European ontology" (71). Without a fixed identity, humans become like spirits (60). This transitory and ghostly existence that Tawada conceptualizes finds echoes in other shamanic works discussed throughout the book. The "in-betweenness" is also reflected in the identity of authors such as Tawada, Pham, and Kim. Rupprecht provides her own translation of the uniquely constructed bilingual (German and Japanese) poem "Flight of the Moon" (1998), exemplifying her

"insistence on an 'in-between' space, where neither place or language is hierarchically privileged" (78).

In Part II, Rupprecht pairs Weiss and Pham, who favor avant-garde techniques such as Brechtian alienation and have a common interest in depicting Vietnam. While both Pham and Weiss are rooted in the avant-garde, they differ in their stance on the Vietnam War. In his avant-garde, minimalist, kinetic documentary theater, *Discourse on Vietnam* (1967), Weiss depicts "hell" on stage. He takes a typical leftist view of the war, focuses on the sufferings of Vietnamese civilians, and condemns American imperialism. The play failed to garner audience interest. Rupprecht attributes Weiss's failure to his troubled relationship with place—a somewhat poetic logic to explain Weiss's inability to depict Vietnam realistically. As a German Jew who escaped Nazi Germany, he was too entrenched in antifascist politics and burdened by survivor guilt to apprehend Vietnam on its own terms. His self-incriminating speculation about the crimes he might have committed if he had been a Nazi led to a conflicted relationship with place and belonging. After this play, Weiss traveled to Vietnam and Cambodia and published *Notes on the Cultural Life of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam* (1968). Here, as well, Rupprecht criticizes Weiss, despite his good intentions, for not transcending his Eurocentric views.

In contrast, Pham, who was born in 1960 in North Vietnam and came to the German Democratic Republic in 1977 to study, critiques the Western view of the Vietnam War for reducing it to a matter of U.S. imperialism and Cold War politics, emphasizing that it originated in a domestic situation. She views it as both a proxy war and a civil war, which differs not only from Weiss's view but also from the official historiography in Vietnam. In addition, her nonconformist, feminist critique of social and economic reforms during the Doi Moi period made her a persona non grata in Vietnam. As a result, her works are censored there. Her collection of short stories, *Sunday Menu* (1995), for example, was published only in German translation, raising the interesting question of who counts as a "German" author.

Part III contrasts Beuys and Kim and points out dissonance between their works. Rupprecht judges Beuys's Eurasian shamanism to be reactionary, but reads Kim as a more convincing shamanic writer. The chapter on Beuys is the most polemic section in the book. He has often been celebrated as a progressive, leftist performing artist who engaged with the National Socialist past and marched for peace and ecology. But Rupprecht, drawing on Hans-Peter Riegel's new biography of Beuys, iconoclastically and emphatically calls him out for his affiliation with the Hitler Youth, his voluntary service in the Luftwaffe, his silence regarding his stationing near the Posen extermination camp in Poland, and his postwar socialization in a circle of ex-Nazis. Beuys's tokenist Holocaust-themed art installation is *Auschwitz Demonstration 1956– 1964* (1970). Thus Rupprecht criticizes his modicum of engagement with the Holocaust and his deeply troubling self-staged shamanism, as if he could exorcize the evil spirits of National Socialism and heal the wound left by it.

Rupprecht analyzes Beuys's reactionary vision of EURASIA, which was key to his artistic program, including his self-proclaimed "free Democratic Socialist State EURASIA" in 1967, and his artworks *The Eurasian* (1958) and *Eurasia Siberian Symphony* (1963). In his permanent exhibition, Beuys placed *The Eurasian* facing away from *Auschwitz Demonstration*. His "empty" space of Eurasia recalls Hitler's expansionist policies toward the East (*Drang nach Osten*) (156). Thus, the great potential of EURASIA for advocating the unity of Europe and Asia is lost.

Following Riegel, Rupprecht discredits the “primal scene” in Beuys’s past—his *Tartarenlegende*, where he got the inspiration to use fat and felt for his art—as a figment of the artist’s imagination.

Kim moved with her family from South Korea to Vienna. Her writing deals with identity crisis, including a sense of alienation in a homogeneous white society and the experience of constantly being stereotyped as “Asian.” Kim also wrote about a wide range of other subjects, including postwar Kosovo in *Frozen Time* (2008) and the suicide epidemic among the Inuit in Greenland in *Anatomy of a Night* (2012). Whereas Rupprecht exposes Beuys as a charlatan, she attributes to Kim’s novels a form of Korean shamanism that serves as a way of empathizing with the sufferings of others. In *The Great Homecoming* (2017), Kim features two female figures who cross boundaries: first, the adoptee narrator who comes to Korea to search for her roots, and second, a Korean woman who works as a spy for the US in South Korea and crosses into North Korea and back. Rupprecht connects these two to the Korean tradition of female shamans who can communicate with the ghosts of history (201).

This chapter uncovers the rarely heard stories of the Zainichi, the stateless Koreans living in Japan who were later “repatriated” to North Korea, which turned out to be tragic for the Zainichi. Rupprecht raises the question of what *Heimat* means in the Korean context. Kim provides an alternative understanding of *Heimat* as a “soul landscape” (*Seelenlandschaft*): “a place where one feels at home does exist, but [. . .] it is not connected to any existing national or political territory” (220). Rupprecht argues that “in this way, Kim most incisively challenges conventional, reactionary notions of *Heimat* associated with nationalist politics, and draws attention to another, invisible spatial dimension that [. . .] is connected to the realm of spirits in shamanism” (220). It is important to note how these Asian-German writers subvert conventional concepts in German culture: Tawada challenges the Kantian philosophy of the Self, Pham unsettles the understanding of a ‘German’ writer and the Vietnam War, and Kim undoes the German notion of *Heimat*.

The epigraph chosen by Rupprecht for her prologue, from Paul Celan’s “Death Fugue,” immediately establishes anti-Semitism and the Holocaust as parameters for the book. Indeed, all three German authors/artists she examines have dealt with the Holocaust to a greater or lesser degree in their work. In the introduction, Rupprecht explains why she chose to use the (originally culinary) term “Asian fusion.” She historicizes “fusion” as the opposite of purity, which she associates with the Nazi rhetoric of racial purity. In her book, “fusion” serves as an avant-garde concept for crossing physical and linguistic borders and dismantling cultural boundaries. Rounding out the book, the author draws the epigraph for the epilogue from a poem from the American Civil Rights movement. She revisits the book’s title and sees “fusion” as a dynamic concept, not an end in itself, and “call-and-response” as “an expression of solidarity within a community” (227).

A critical observation should be offered. Although the Holocaust and anti-Semitism are invoked as the premise of the book, the Asian German works do not address anti-Semitism or the Holocaust per se. Rupprecht suggests that the analysis of anti-Semitism can be productively applied to discrimination against East Asians in Germany because “East Asians do not currently have a discursive framework with which to combat historically racist attitudes that are, unfortunately, still directed against them” (9). Even if this were the case, it is risky to assume that

a theoretical framework developed for one historical form of racism can be applied to another form of racism with its own genealogy. The "Yellow Peril" and Sinophobia, for example, existed as German racist tropes before the First World War. These discourses emerged at a time when the East Asian communities in Germany were too small to be noticed by mainstream German culture. While Rupprecht takes an important ethical stance and aims to create a discursive space and theoretical framework for addressing racism against East Asians, it is worth pondering further how best to connect the analysis of anti-Semitism with that of racism against immigrants. But Rupprecht's call for recognizing that German minorities—Jews, Blacks, or Asians— have "the right to belong" is especially urgent at a moment when the New Right is on the rise (227).

Asian Fusion is pioneering as a foray into new territories and in forging methods of research that could inspire more Asian German authors to write high-caliber literature as well as inspire other scholars to undertake similar comparative work to integrate minority authors into the mainstream. The book will be appreciated by teachers and students who are interested in the Shoah, diasporic studies, gender studies, race theory, comparative literature, and Asian German Studies. Although Rupprecht's methodology goes beyond Orientalism, post-colonial theory, empire studies, and Ray Chow's concept of entanglement, this book should be noted by adherents to those theories as well.