

The Popular in China: Interview with Carlos Rojas

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Carlos Rojas is the author of *The Naked Gaze: Reflections on Chinese Modernity* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), *The Great Wall: A Cultural History* (Harvard University Press, 2010), and *Homesickness: Culture, Contagions, and National Reform in Modern China* (Harvard University Press, 2015), which looks at Chinese discourses of corporeality and infection over the long twentieth century. He is the co-editor, with David Der-wei Wang, of *Writing Taiwan: A New Literary History* (Duke University Press, 2007); with Eileen Cheng-yin Chow, of both *Rethinking Chinese Popular Culture: Cannibalizations of the Canon* (Routledge: 2009) and the *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas* (Oxford University Press, 2013); and, with Andrea Bachner, of *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Finally, he is the co-translator, again with Eileen Chow, of Yu Hua's two-volume novel, *Brothers* (Pantheon, 2009), and is the translator of Yan Lianke's novels *Lenin's Kisses* (Grove/Atlantic Press, 2012) and *The Four Books* (Grove/Atlantic Press, 2015). He teaches at the Duke University Department of Asian & Middle Eastern Studies on a variety of topics ranging from prostitutes and vampires to cities, migration, and disease.

“Discourses and fantasies of cannibalism occupied” - as you sustained in “Cannibalism and the Chinese Body Politic: Hermeneutics and Violence in Cross-Cultural Perception” – “a crucial liminal space where the presumptive limits of human society are simultaneously challenged and implicitly reaffirmed.” Taking into account the growing cross-cultural transnational environment, as well as the Sinophone articulations that characterize popular culture and the discontinuous flows of equivalence and alterity that it promotes, what would be, in your opinion, the rearrangements in the abstract models of subjectivization and subjugation that operate nowadays in the complex and rapidly changing Chinese cultural context?

I made this observation about a decade ago, in the context of a discussion of allusions to cannibalism (metaphorical or actual) in a variety of Sinophone works, including essays, novels, and performance art, and simultaneously proposed that the figure of cannibalism offers a useful metaphor for understanding contemporary patterns of socio-cultural interaction, particularly across ethnic or national boundaries. For instance, I opened with a discussion of a performance work by the Chinese artist Zhu Yu, who took pictures of himself consuming what he claimed was an actual human infant. Somehow, images of the performance then began to circulate (out of context) over the Internet and in print media, until eventually a Malaysian newspaper reprinted them with the claim that a restaurant in Taiwan was serving actual human fetuses as food. I argued that the metaphor of cannibalism offers a useful way of understanding not only the way that human society has traditionally differentiated itself from its radical other (with cannibalism being a paradigmatic marker of that which lies outside the sphere of humanity), but also the way in which it simultaneously relies on fantasy of alterity to buttress its own self-understanding.

I believe the observation remains applicable today, as communities around the world become increasingly intertwined while at the same time being highly motivated to differentiate themselves from one another. In the Zhu Yu example cited above, for instance, the trope of cannibalism circulates through Mainland China, Taiwan, Malaysia, and beyond, and in each case it offers a site of strategic disidentification—permitting a wide array of different groups to claim, “we are not that which this represents.”

In reality, what we observe here is a phenomenon that Freud calls the narcissism of small differences, wherein communities or groups are most highly motivated to distinguish themselves from precisely those groups whom otherwise they most closely resemble. In a global Sinophone context, it is precisely the underlying cultural commonalities that unite many regions with large Chinese populations that frequently motivate those same regions to strategically differentiate themselves from each other.

According to Julia Lovell in the introduction to her translation of *The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun* (2010), Mao once acknowledged that Lu Xun, due to his burning satire and freezing irony, would “either have gone silent, or gone to prison”, had he lived on through the political violence unleashed in China from the 1950s onwards. Contrary to this opinion, at least much of his writing did indeed survive and is just starting to go silent, paradoxically, now, 25 years into the era of reform and opening. In 2007, Beijing removed “The True Story of Ah Q” from teaching materials for high school seniors; in 2009, newspapers reported that the number of Lu Xun’s essays included in the curriculum was steadily declining; in 2013, People’s Education Press removed Lu Xun’s essay “The Kite” from seventh grade textbooks. Meanwhile, the study of Confucius is reemerging, with Confucius Institutes opening around the world, where children, dressed in ancient robes, recite the sage’s aphorisms. In 2014, Chinese President and Chairman of the Communist Party Xi Jinping even gave a speech at the official commemoration of Confucius’s 2,565th birthday. How can this actual change of assessment be read, bearing in mind that these two enduring authors, both crucial names in Chinese popular culture, were praised and recognized as models of correctness to battle the devil with passionate seriousness of rightness and purpose?

The point has often been made that Mao, as early as his “Talks at the Yan’an Forum” in 1942, lionized the recently deceased Lu Xun (stating approvingly that, “Living under the rule of the dark forces and deprived of freedom of speech, Lu Xun used burning satire and freezing irony, cast in the form of essays, to do battle; and he was entirely right”), precisely so that Lu Xun’s works and his legacy could be appropriated as a symbol of the communist regime Mao was still attempting to bring to reality, as opposed to serving as a symbol of opposition and dissent. At the same

time, many scholars have observed that, had Lu Xun survived into the Maoist era, he almost certainly would have been tempted to leverage his satirical and critical energy against the Maoist regime itself.

Lu Xun died in 1936, and while it is certainly true that his works remained in wide circulation in China after that, the result was very different from if he himself had survived into the Maoist period. Most authors who were active in the 1930s and 1940s basically stopped writing creatively after 1949, and there were very few who were not at some point persecuted on political grounds.

As for China's current practice of pulling Lu Xun's works from high school textbooks while at the same time promoting the study of Confucius, this is indeed a curious set of new developments. Confucius was, of course, explicitly critiqued under Mao, as a symbol of "feudal China," but contemporary China is apparently capitalizing on the emphasis on New Confucianism among scholars not only in China but also Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the U.S. Lionel Jensen has argued, in *Manufacturing Confucianism*, that the figure of Confucius is the product of a fundamental reinvention on the part of sixteenth and seventeenth century Jesuit missionaries, who were looking for Chinese equivalents for the Christian narratives and values that they were attempting to promote. To the extent that this argument has validity, it is ironic that, at the contemporary moment, we find China and other Sinophone countries and regions reinventing a Confucian legacy once again, precisely in order to differentiate themselves from modern incarnations of the same sorts of Western traditions that the early Jesuit missionaries represented in the first place.

In April 2014, during the Beijing International Film Festival, American filmmaker Oliver Stone contended that "Mao Zedong has been lionized in dozens and dozens of Chinese films, but never criticized". He also argued that it is time for Chinese directors to confront the nation's past, for only that would "stir the waters" and "allow true creativity to emerge" in the country. Long before this occasion, scholars such as Liu Kang have contended likewise that Chinese contemporary dominant narratives on modernity have been continually and deliberately eliding and concealing China's revolutionary legacy (Liu, 2004: 28). Do you think that an acknowledgement of the bitter sides of recent history through film and other forms of popular culture would actually be an important move that would allow China to both reconcile with its past and formulate its own alternative perspectives on modernity?

Actually, there are in fact quite a few films and other cultural works that examine “the bitter sides of recent (Chinese) history.” There are, for instance, a large number of films that critically examine the brutality of the Cultural Revolution, with some of the best-known examples including Zhang Yimou’s *To Live* and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell my Concubine*. The documentary filmmaker Wu Wenguang and several of his colleagues are currently producing a series of documentaries focusing on the hardships people endured during the Great Famine that resulted from the policy errors associated with the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. There is also a large body of literature that explores these and related issues. For instance, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a body of literary production known as “scar literature,” which revolved around the hardships people endured during the Cultural Revolution. More recently, some more self-reflective works examine similar concerns. For instance, Yan Lianke, an author with whom I work closely, has written thoughtfully and critically about a wide range of recent historical issues, including the Great Leap Forward and the resulting famine (*The Four Books*), China’s rural AIDS epidemic (*Dream of Ding Village*), and the ideological excesses of the Cultural Revolution (*Serve the People*).

As China undergoes an economic transformation ten times the speed of the first Industrial Revolution, it seems that people are, at the same time, turning to ancient ideas for a complex connection to the past and historical periods such as the “Century of Humiliation”. This puts the West and China in the curious position of facing rivalry while their own citizens are sharing more and more of the same tastes, jokes, pop culture entertainment, products and pleasures that are sometimes used to criticize, censure and condemn. Thus, the slow, steady accretion of global popular culture has given people on both sides cultural products that may encourage them to think more about what they have in common with one another than, maybe, ever before. How do these countervailing cultural interactions impact, in your opinion, the resonating notion of self-conscious Chineseness?

Yes, it is true that it is becoming increasingly easy for popular culture to circulate transnationally. However, it is equally true that culture does not circulate evenly or homogeneously. Certain types of works are more likely to circulate beyond their site of (putative) origin than others, and even works that do circulate widely may be understood differently in different regional or cultural settings. Moreover, there is a

generally asymmetrical relationship between the dissemination of nominally “Western” culture and “Asian” culture (i.e., it is much easier for something like the Harry Potter series to achieve global recognition than a comparable nominally “non-Western” work like Jin Yong’s *wuxia* novels or Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*).

Actually, what interests me most about your question is the reference to a “resonating notion of self-conscious chineseness.” What is perhaps most interesting about the transnational circulation of cultural products in and beyond contemporary Sinophone communities is the degree to which they underscore the diverse ways in which “Chineseness” itself is understood. Many of Jin Yong’s best-selling novels, for instance, feature characters belonging to a wide array of different Sinitic ethnic groups, and Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* famously features actors from a variety of different backgrounds, many of whom speak Chinese with a strikingly different accent. I would argue, therefore, that the increasingly transregional and transnational character of contemporary popular culture not only has the potential to bring people from diverse backgrounds into a common dialogue, it simultaneously has the ability to encourage different groups to reflect on what distinguishes them from one another—including different communities that might otherwise be grouped under the broader umbrella category of “chineseness.”

Bearing influence from the works of the Yunnan School of modern Chinese painting (Yunnan Huapai), the Fifth Generation film productions such as Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *On the Hunting Ground* (1985) and *Horse Thief* (1987), and also from the state policies encouraging ethnic and cultural tourism, national ethnic minorities have gained considerable visibility in post-Mao Chinese mainstream popular culture. From literature and photography, to music, cuisine and fashion, ethnic influences have therefore become a noticeable presence in the mass-based realms of Chinese contemporary cultural life. Considering this, how do you think minority ethnicity is being represented and negotiated in twenty-first century China’s popular culture, and in what ways are these representations contributing to the unfolding of new perceptions of local ethnic cultures and the portraying of new images concerning China’s national identity?

There has been a longstanding practice, in post-1949 China, of focusing the socio-cultural characteristics (e.g., distinctive songs, dress styles, and so forth) that

ostensibly distinguish China's different minority ethnic groups from one another, and also from the Han majority. This practice has continued into the twenty-first century, particularly as China's inner border regions increasingly become profitable tourist destinations. At the same time, there is a growing interest among some ethnic minority groups in gaining greater control over their own cultural representation, and this is particularly true among groups (such as Uighurs and Tibetans) that are viewed by the Chinese state as politically sensitive. There is a fine line between cultural representations that reinforce existing stereotypes, and ones that sensitively explore ethnocultural difference. One relevant factor involves who is creating and promoting these cultural representations, though it should be emphasized that it is not uncommon for minority groups to reproduce and reinforce cultural stereotypes promoted by state-sponsored discourses, and it is equally possible to individuals who do not belong to a particular ethnic group to produce cultural works that examine the distinctive qualities of that group in a sensitive and productive manner.

China's box office surged ahead by 36% to hit \$4.82 billion in 2014, consolidating China as the second-largest film market after the US. The prospect of the Chinese market is so alluring that some U.S. entertainment companies seem willing to barter away their hard-won creative freedom in order to break into it. Nowadays, 34 Hollywood films are allowed to be shown in China each year, based on an agreement struck between the two countries in 2012. Some of those films are specially adapted for the Chinese market. How does that affect the processes of identification and differentiation of both filmic discursive traditions? What are the possible consequences of rearranging these popular culture signs to produce new cultural meanings and identities?

The precipitous growth of China's box office has raised a number of interesting issues. On one hand, Hollywood is increasingly producing films with an eye to the Chinese market—and in some cases it has either altered films to accommodate Chinese sensibilities (e.g., *Red Dawn*), or else has released an alternative version intended specifically for the Chinese market (e.g., *Iron Man 3*). At the same time, this same growth has encouraged the production of a growing number of high-quality films from China itself, together with a large number of co-productions that increasingly blur the distinction between Hollywood films and Chinese ones.

Considering popular culture as an important site for the circulation, production and contestation of relations of power, how has it contributed to the formation of Hong Kong's contemporary cultural identity? And in which ways has it been evoking the changing cultural status of the territory in the last few decades and the complex relationship with Mainland China, especially after the handover?

One of the consequences of the 1984 agreement to "return" Hong Kong to PRC control in 1997 was a concerted interest in the question of Hong Kong identity, particularly as it pertains to the cultural arena. This question has remained an object of considerable interest in the years following the Handover. To cite just one example, between 1997 and 1999 the Hong Kong director Fruit Chan released his "Hong Kong trilogy," which examines the consequences of the Handover from a variety of different perspectives. More recently, in 2014, he released the horror film *The Midnight After*, which featured a small group of survivors in a dystopian version of Hong Kong that has suddenly been transformed into a virtually empty ghost town. The apocalyptic tone of Fruit Chan's film, which is based on a popular Internet novel that was released the preceding year, pairs ironically and suggestively with the Umbrella Movement that was launched just months after the film's Hong Kong debut. Watched closely in Hong Kong, China, and around the world, the Umbrella Movement was a bold and widely-supported intervention into the question of Hong Kong's sociopolitical status in the post-Handover era, though its long-term effects remain to be seen.