

**Leilei Chen, *Re-Orienting China: Travel Writing and Cross-Cultural Understanding* (University of Regina Press, 2016)**

As scholar Leilei Chen writes in her introduction, although research into travel writing has increased greatly since the publication of Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (1978), very little has been written about travel literature pertaining to China. Furthermore, what little there is focuses mainly on travel between the Victorian period and 1949, when China became a Communist country. Criticism of these earlier works was frequently concerned with the authenticity of the writer's reported experiences, and 'the traveller's relationship with otherness' (3). In this volume, Chen seeks to go beyond the 'traveller vs. other' binary to find points of connection between cultures, and to examine the ideological underpinnings of six rarely studied travel writers. All six are based in North America and have travelled to China after 1949. Chen herself was born and raised in China, and is now living and teaching in Canada.

She begins with a discussion of American Peter Hessler's *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (2001), an account of the author's experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fuling while in his twenties. Unlike the imperialism evident in earlier travel writing, as cited by Said, Hessler's approach is humble. He realises that he has a lot to learn, and that his own culture is not superior to that of the villagers that he has been sent to help. He recognises the need to learn the local language in order to form relationships with the people in his village. Throughout the book, he remains self-critical. As Chen writes, 'For Hessler, cross-cultural understanding means remaining ambivalent about the dichotomous vision of the self and the other and about the knowledge produced about the foreign place by one's writing and filming' (42).

Chen has arranged the chapters thematically, not chronologically, so an analysis of Hessler's memoir is followed by a chapter on Canadian Jock Tuzo Wilson's 1958 trip to China, as detailed in *One Chinese Moon*. Like Hessler, Wilson arrived in the country with a positive view. However, Chen points out that his visit was carefully controlled, and that he happened to be in China during a year in which there was a good harvest. Nevertheless, Wilson, a geologist, was able to engage with other scientists on a personal level, and found that they did not conform to Western stereotypes of the Chinese ('impassive and inscrutable people') (46). Chen points out that travel allows a critical distance from one's home culture, which might be serving up propaganda. She has a favourable impression of Wilson, who expressed the desire for humanities education to expand beyond Western culture, encompassing global cultures, way before 'multiculturalism' became a buzz word.

Chapter Three centers on Jan Wong's 'egological' memoirs, *A Comrade Lost and Found: A Beijing Story*, and *Red China Blues*. In the current publishing climate which privileges 'own voices' one might expect that a book written by a Chinese-Canadian journalist who can speak Chinese would offer an especially authentic view of the country. Wong, it would seem, is more of a cultural insider than Wilson or Hessler. Chen finds, however, that Wong's view of China is distorted by her overly high expectations and her personally traumatic experiences in China.

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Chen writes, 'It seems that Wong's difficult time in China leads her to represent virtually all her Chinese associates as unpleasant and unlikeable' (67).

In Chapters Five and Six, Chen takes up Chinese-American Leslie T. Chang's *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*, in which the author appears as a 'character' – the interviewer; and *Coming Home to China*, an account of a journey made by the Chinese-born Yi-Fu Tuan after living abroad for 64 years. Tuan, founder of the field of human geography, intersperses his account with other travel experiences and academic speeches. His experience in China, as one who is between cultures, emphasises the perpetual homelessness intrinsic in the human condition.

Chen also dissects the more nuanced *Looking for Chengdu: A Woman's Adventures in China* by American anthropologist Hill Gates. Gates points out that travel writing is fictional because it is written for a particular readership. Some elements are left out, some embellished, and insights are often added later. The experience itself is crafted and edited in the retelling to suit the expectations of the intended audience.

*Re-Orienting China* was written for scholars, but it is accessible to the general reader. Throughout this book, Chen's writing is intelligent and intelligible – happily free of jargon – and her analysis is persuasive. In her Afterword, Chen writes of how she herself was transformed by her research, and suggests areas for further study: 'This project has probed the important questions of cross-cultural understanding; however, it remains unfinished. It has not elaborated on the question of gender' (154). Not only that, but *Re-Orienting China* also invites examination of more intersectional texts, such as those written by black or other Asian travellers in China, disabled travellers, those from the LBGTI community, and those in mixed marriages in China.

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