
James B. Lewis’ study *Frontier Contact between Choson Korea and Tokugawa Japan* represents an important shift in Western scholarship on pre-modern Korea, away from central-government concerns and the ideological outlook of yangban towards local conditions and the socio-economic structures dictating everyday life. It is an ambitious work that aims not only to redefine relations between Choson Korea and Tokugawa Japan (through Tsushima Island), but also to raise questions about national borders and the homogeneity of territory. This is done through a detailed study of the Japan House [Waegwan] in Pusan, Tongnae County, the only port open for the Japanese, or rather people from the Tsushima Island who acted as intermediaries. The impact of these contacts on the Tsushima Island and especially the Kyongsang Province is gauged, implying that this area constituted a border region. To facilitate this approach the author makes use of theories on “borders” and the construction of “national” sentiments.

The first chapter, “Introduction: reconstructing the past and constructing the future”, gives an outline of relations between Choson Korea and Tokugawa Japan as these were manifested in Korean embassies to Edo (T’ongsinsa), the handling of castaways, and the Japan House in Pusan. This introduction also, as indicated by the chapter title, reminds the people of present of the importance of these contacts. The reader is furthermore provided with an, at times maybe too detailed, review of studies on national identity and borders/frontiers, providing the theoretical framework of the study.

The second chapter, “Tsushima’s identity and the post-Injin waeran Japan House”, gives a detailed description of the socio-economic and political characteristics of the Tsushima Island. It discusses the importance of Choson, not only in the finances of the island, but also in terms of institutional borrowings such as slavery and taxation legislation. It is argued that the island occupied a “zone of ambiguous boundary qualities”. To support this argument the author discusses events during the Japanese invasion of the late sixteenth century when troops sent from the island seems to have included men from the peninsula, constituting a population of “marginal men”. Thought provoking as this is, it leaves open the question of the extent to which the term tojin ṭọjin used for these people really can be interpreted as Koreans. Thereafter follows a very informative history of the various Japanese Houses on the Korean peninsula.
after the Japanese invasion, providing illustrative map material.

The third chapter, “The demographic significance of the Japan House: in search of a maritime economy”, gives a detailed and fascinating demographic description of Kyongsang, Tongnae, and the sub-units of this county. Through this the author is able to show the changing position of Tongnae within the province. In the fifteenth century this county was the fiftieth in terms of population and forty-seventh in terms of arable land. In the eighteenth century, however, it was twentieth in population and thirty-fourth in arable land, and this was a trend that became even more conspicuous in the nineteenth century. Although not able to prove this, the author speculates that this was due to the presence of the Japan House and a linked development of a maritime economy. These findings are indeed very interesting, but the question of how much this was due to the Japanese presence and how much it was due to other factors like topography, agricultural output, or a nationwide development of a maritime economy are left open, although introduced. This analysis would have benefited from a comparison with other coastal areas nationwide, not only within the Kyongsang Province, to see whether this was part of a nationwide trend, and to be able to more accurately gauge the significance of the Japan House. Chapters three and four dealing with the demographic and economic impact of contacts with Japan constitute the strong part of this study, but unfortunately the structure of narration is somewhat confusing. Arguing that trade with Tsushima influenced the demography of Kyongsang, the lively private trade is treated in the chapter three. So the fourth chapter, “The economic significance of the Waegwan”, ends up discussing only the official economic contacts and the costs incurred to maintain diplomatic contacts with Tokugawa Japan. Still, the comparison of perceived costs with the actual incurred costs for the Choson state is very informative of the discrepancy between state ideology and the actual performance of contacts with Japan in this period. Claiming to take a look from the frontier rather than the centre, the author then discusses the significance of this for the province, arguing that Kyongsang and Tsushima shared a “single economy”. However, this reader is left wondering whether the author really is not gauging the significance of this for the central government. Does the author then discuss the state of the Waegwan as a Japanese negotiating tactic, despite the catchy title, in fact not much is said about the “political significance” of the Japan House and how much it was due to other factors like topography, agricultural output, or a nationwide development of a maritime economy? The fifth chapter, “Pénétration du corps social: prostitution and the rivalry of power and culture at the Japan House in the eighteenth century”, does also provide some very interesting micro-historical narration, but once again not enough cases are really presented to support any argument. Before the final remarks, just a few comments on proofreading and peculiarities in the test. First of all, the book starts with a quotation by Amenomori Hōshi, and he constantly appears in narration. So does the reader really need to be told on page 177 that he was “a Confucian advisor to the Tsushima datum”?

Such repetitious information hinders the flow of argument in this reader’s view. The test uses both “Board of Revenue” and “Board of Taxation” as translation for Hōjo, even on the same page (102). Inconsistent Romanization occurs, as for example Kim Ok-šinn/Kim Ok-šin, also within the scope of one page (111). Given the importance attached to name changes to maintain diplomatic contacts with the Choson state in the eighteenth century, does the author imply that the wrong character is provided for nun in the glossary? Some of us find the following important, whereas other might not, but still, on page 90 soju is translated as “25 percent grade alcohol”. Not only a peculiar translation, but also confusing the contemporary soju, which is a product of the colonial period, with the traditional forms of this spirit that contained much higher percentages of alcohol. This reader also wonders what principle underlies the representation of 九鬼昌喜 as Takehjiyo puyo rather than Takeji chojinbuge. Probably more due to dullness, but still, it took some time before this reader realized what text was referred to. Finally, translating “yunanin chap’tal” (sic) as “tax relief for miscellaneous disasters” gives a misleading impression of the character of this tax-exemption category which mostly was constituted of land lying fallow.

To conclude, this book provides a fascinating demographic and economic history of the Kyongsang province and Tongnae County, supplemented with
intriguing micro-historical narratives, and a very much needed overview of the Japan House and the Tsushima Island. If I as a reviewer were to point out a weakness, it is that the study fails to live up to the ambitious aims set out in the introduction. The study claims to take a look at these issues, not from the centre, but from the frontier. As stated: “we have also sought to identify Korean attitudes and ideas about the Japanese that grew from the direct experience of daily contact” (215), and “our approach has been to privilege the view from the frontier” (210). However, when finally summing up the findings of the study the author argues that “Late Choson-period Koreans saw the Japan House as a severe economic drain with an inexhaustible appetite, a difficult administrative challenge that demanded, even occasionally consumed, good men; and a pernicious establishment that defied Korean authority, bred crime, and threatened to subvert the integrity of the society and polity.” (216) But is not that exactly the view from the core? What about the view of merchants involved, peasants in the area, fishermen, etc? Arguably it would be difficult to treat the view of these people given existing material, but then maybe the approach of the study should have been different. So, to what extent was a theoretical framework based on “frontiers” really useful in analysing existing material that tells us more about central government concerns than local society? Also, the introduction gave a detailed review of studies on “national san tions”, but this is then never really treated in the book. The author claims that the real situation of these contacts and their consequences for local society and national identity just has started to be revealed. However, although this study seems to be a thorough analysis of existing material, the author still find it difficult to make many affirmative conclusions. So, what more is there to see? Can we really get a deeper understanding of this giving existing material? If the book also had addressed these questions now left hanging in the air, it would certainly have been an even more important contribution to the field.

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A decade ago, teaching Korean literature in Western universities was severely hampered by the lack of readable, engaging narratives on Korean literary history in European languages. Beginning with Kim Kichung’s “Introduction to Korean literature” (1996), a number of histories of Korean literature have appeared in the meantime: by Kim Hunggyu (trl. by Robert Forouer, 1997), James Hoyt 2000, Choo Dong-il and Daniel Bousche (in French, 2002), and Maurizio Riotto (in Italian, 2000)2. But for different reasons, be it due to their originally intended audience, their language of composition or their scope, especially in terms of periods covered, a definite standard textbook for Korean literature courses was still a desideratum. Peter H. Lee’s “History of Korean Literature” has the potential to become just that: it covers the literary tradition as well as modern literature up to the present, it presents a wealth of information, and it is informative for the Korean Studies specialist without being too technical for a general readership.

This remarkable achievement became possible through a collaborative effort, led by the doyen of Korean literature studies in the West, Peter H. Lee of the University of California at Los Angeles. In all, seven scholars have contributed to the book, even while more than half of the chapters were authored or co-authored by Peter H. Lee himself.

The introduction by Peter H. Lee serves the double purpose of providing basic information on the preconditions of literary production in pre-modern times, expounding on the education and literary purposes of the literati elite and the concomitant “hierarchy of genres”, and of explaining the paradigms of Korean literary historiography as it developed during the 20th century, as well as the methodological premises of the present book. He warns against an imbalanced, ideologically grounded view on Korean literature (i.e., a one-sided stress on vernacular genres to the detriment of literati writings) and against haphazard application of Western theory originating on the base of a very different tradition. Chapter 1, co-authored by Lee and the linguist Ho-Min Sohn, again serves introductory purposes as it provides an outline of the characteristics of the Korean language, and a very brief account of some of the most important poetic genres and themes of pre-modern Korean literature. Chapter 2, again by Peter H. Lee, gives a brief account of the few things we know from mostly Chinese sources about oral literature in ancient Korean history, both myths and folk songs, and the scattered texts that have been transmitted from this early period. The following chapters 3 to 24, i.e. the bulk of the book, are each devoted to a certain cluster of writing, mostly a genre, during a defined time period. Peter H. Lee offers a chapter each on “Hyangga”, “Silla writings in Chinese”, “Koryó songs”, “Koryó writings in Chinese”, “Early Choson eulogies” (i.e. akchang
kasa), “Early Chosôn sijo”, “Early Chosôn kasa”, “Late Chosôn sijo”, and “Late Chosôn kasa”. This is followed by five chapters written by Kim Hûnggyu on “Chosôn poetry in Chinese”, “Chosôn fiction in Chinese”, “Chosôn fiction in Korean” (with P.H. Lee), “Panseot”, and “Folk drama”. Another chapter by Lee on “Literary criticism” is the final section on pre-modern literature. Modern literature is presented along the divide in “early” and “late” twentieth century, with one chapter on “Early twentieth-century poetry” (Peter H. Lee) and a chapter each on early twentieth-century fiction by men (Kwûn Yongmin) and by women (Carolyn So), late twentieth-century poetry by men (Peter H. Lee) and by women (Kim Chûngsun), and late-twentieth-century fiction by men (Kwûn Yongmin) and by women (Ch’ûk Yun). These last four chapters treat only South Korean literature; North Korean literature is introduced in a final chapter by Kwûn Yongmin.

These short overview over the contents of the book will suffice to reveal to anyone knowledgeable in the field both the advantages and the disadvantages of a such a kind of labor division. On the positive side there is the obvious amount of expertise that has been contributed to this volume. With Kim Hûnggyu and Kwûn Yongmin, two of the most well-known Korean kung- munhak scholars haven taken part in this endeavour, Kim Chûngsun and Ch’ûk Yun, besides being respected literary scholars as well, both are themselves creatively active in the fields they relate and can therefore offer an inside perspective as well as their detailed knowledge. It is really most applaudable that Peter H. Lee, who with his decades of experience in the field and an earlier attempt at an overview over important aspects of pre-modern Korean literature to his credit, certainly would have had the potential to do otherwise, put matters of personal ambition aside and supplemented his own rich expertise with the wisdom of some of the best among his colleagues. The result is a book that is most commendable for the wealth of information it offers, for the well-rounded narrative of most of the chapters, and, most of all, for its account of modern Korean literature. Occupying almost 200 of the circa 500 text pages, this is, to my knowledge, the most extended discussion of twentieth-century Korean literature available in a Western language so far - an extremely welcome contribution to the field.

But there are detriments as well. For the somewhat wooden organization of the book along lines of genre and period creates a number of methodological problems, two of which are important enough to warrant discussion here.

Firstly, looking at literature in terms of genres is not conducive to a comprehensive understanding of literary developments of a given period, especially of their socio-political and ideological aspects. The overall make-up of the literary field, the intricate interplay between hanmun, vernacular and oral literature that was so characteristic for the longest part of Korean literary history, and the peculiar mood and motivations pervading specific historical periods is difficult to describe when tied to an individual genre like sijo or kasa. E.g., sijo and kasa production from the 16th to the 19th century certainly had more commonalities than differences, and was in itself tied to changing views on the function of literature and vernacular poetry that were in turn closely connected with developments in, and expressed through, hanmun literature. Ironically, the gender aspect of literary production that appears as such a prominent concern of the book when looking at the table of contents suffers most from this piecemeal treatment, as the chapters on “men” prove to be the master narrative supplemented by the chapters on the female contribution. For example, the important role the roman fleuve plays in the literary scene from the 1960s onward cannot be adequately analyzed without mentioning female writer Pak Kyûngi who accordingly figures in the chapter on “late twentieth-century fiction by men”. This would make the women who are treated in their “own” chapter appear all the more as receiving attention for their gender rather than for their intrinsic importance within the literary field, were it not for Ch’ûk Yun’s masterly account of developments in “female” fiction up to the most recent period.

Secondly, such a segmentation of literary history, as well considered as it may be, can hardly fail to produce both redundancies and gaps. An example for repetitiveness is the treatment of the emergent nativist poetics (Chosôn p’ungs) both in the chapter on “Late Chosôn poetry in Chinese” and on “Literary Criticism”. Of course, in the light of the historical importance of this movement, such double treatment is less than deplorable; a far more severe issue are the things that have been left out of the picture. It would show a lack of common sense to demand all-inclusiveness of a one-volume literary history. However, inclusion and exclusion of genres indicates historical judgement on what should interest us in the literature of a given period. In this light, two apparent lacunae in the historical narrative of the present volume appear troubling to this reviewer. One is dramatic literature of the twentieth century, the other, Chosôn non-fictional prose.

In comparison with fiction and poetry, theater has been woefully neglect ed so far by literary critics and translators into Western languages alike; all the more useful would an account of this important genre have been for those interested in contemporary Korean literary culture and its early modern roots. Neither the beginnings of modern fictional writing nor minjung literature of the 70s and 80s can be thoroughly understood without reference to performative
genres, to cite just two examples. Of even greater consequences is the omission of a chapter on non-fictional writings of the Choson period. Granted, distinctions from philosophical, political and academic writings are difficult outside the fictional sphere. But to just disregard non-fiction contrasts strangely with the introduction’s claim of a balanced perspective unh hampered by modern/western literary paradigms, for the bulk of what Choson literati wrote and considered worthwhile literary endeavours was exactly non-fictional prose of most diverse kinds - many of which do appeal as literature even to the modern reader. Thus, neglect of all non-fictional prose genres resulted in omission of some of the greatest treasures of Korean literature both in hanumun and kungmun, e.g. Pak Choson’s Yorha ilgi and Hyegyong-gung’s Hanjungnok.

These gaps, deplorable as they may be, can be understood as the price for the basic idea of gathering specialists’ accounts. We owe to this idea a book that combines readability with reliable information and will certainly become an important classroom resource. Students and general readers alike will also profit from the book’s apparatus with index and extensive bibliography. In all likelihood, they will find the additional list of “Suggestions for further reading” for each chapter most helpful. Another, most welcome tool for teaching is the glossary which doesn’t confine itself to giving Chinese characters for names, titles and terms, but adds short explanations and therefore functions as a small dictionary of Korean literature. The efforts that must have gone into preparation of this most useful glossary should be much applauded, even if the editorial decision to place it (along with the table of Korean dynasties) not in the appendix but right in the beginning of the book, between preface and introduction, will not enhance the book’s attraction to the non-academic reader.

In sum, Peter H. Lee, who has long been a sort of cultural hero in regard to the transmission and explanation of Korean literature to a Western audience - in Germany, his 1959 anthology of Korean poetry in admirable German translation is unforgettable - has crowned his life-long efforts with this remarkable book. My advice to students of Korean Studies: go and get it, you won’t be able to do without it. My advice to scholars in the field: go and get it; in a book of such scope, you will necessarily find something to disagree with, but you can not afford not to find out what that will be.

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Over the past two decades, South Korea has transformed itself from an authoritarian government into a new democracy with a vibrant capitalist economy. Modernization, democratization, and globalization have played an important role in this transformation, and have greatly influenced the programs and policies of Korea’s Sixth Republic. Covering developments through the 2004 elections, this book shows how the South Korean government and society have been shaped not only by the dynamics of these forces, but also by their interaction with the cultural norms of post-Confucian society. The author discusses the forces shaping Korea’s political economy and the performance of successive ROK governments, and also highlights the challenges faced by the newly elected administration of Roh Moo Hyun, the North Korean issue.

Presenting a thematic exploration of the transformation of society since the 1987 democratic opening, Kihl examines the interplay of democracy, institutional reform, and culture over the past decade and a half. He sets the stage by discussing the importance of culture to the acceptance of political doctrines and institutions, then proceeding to explore the evolution of policy patterns and processes. He then assesses the likelihood that democracy will endure, arguing that it will if elections are perceived as “fair and effective” and the economy continues to generate prosperity and wealth.

The transformation of the Republic of Korea from one of the poorest countries in the world to a leading industrialized nation and member of the OECD in just a few decades is one of the great achievements of the modern world. Faced with a grave threat to the very existence of the country, all members of society came together or were drawn together to support the goal of rapid economic development.

The pressures in society could not be suppressed forever and the scenes of students and other activists demanding democracy in the teeth of armed police are an abiding memory of the 1980s. These succeeded as democratically elected presidents took office and began the process of substituting government for autocracy. How far the process of democratization has been completed is one of the core areas of discussion of this book.
In order to determine whether politics meaningfully exists in Korea today, Kihl provides a theoretical framework linking the roles of ideas, values and culture in the political system. In doing so, he considers the Korean contemporary political society, including foreign relations, labor relations, the civil society and the role of business. This makes for a detailed and complex analysis that is suitable for a Korea or politics specialist but is likely to be deluging to a casual reader.

After the introductory chapter, the book is divided into three main areas. The first provides a historical context to the study. The three chapters discuss the interaction of Korean society with outside powers and its impact on the Korean society which eventually brought a change in the nature of Korean Confucianism. It also discusses about the relationship between modernization and development using the examples of the trials of former presidents as somewhat ambivalent examples.

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sages of student activism.

To Sin Ch’ae-ho (1890-1930), historian, philosopher, Korean nationalist, eventual anarchist and general gadfly to the Japanese colonial government, the practice of history was motivated by an imperative: to get to the roots of Korea’s impotence and in so doing to save her. As with the other individuals and movements examined by Jager, history to Sin was an attempt at both salvaging the true Korean past from the distortions that had covered it over the centuries and in doing so to forge the way to a more glorious, and self-respectable, present and future by resurrecting the true core of what it meant to be “Korean”. History could be an act of redemption. To Sin it was the embrace of alien Sinonic Confucian ethics, best personified by the 12th century scholar-official Kim Pusaik, which paved the way for Korea’s demise. Confucianism and subservience to China supplanted Korea’s own native character and strength - to Sin perhaps best personified by the Koguryo general Chil Mun-dok.

Sin Ch’ae-ho was not alone in his assessment that something had gone drastically wrong with Korea, something so wrong as to lead to the nation’s colonization. Of course, later Korean thinkers, writers, politicians, and activists would have a new litany of woes to add to the evidence bin, all of which seemed to confirm the basic assertion: all these self-professed doctors of the national soul: something was wrong with the Korean character and it had to be fixed if Korea were ever to be strong (and united) again. Though they agreed with Sin’s assessment of Korea’s critical condition, not all agreed on what was wrong. However, as Jager attempts to argue, the various diagnoses offered up by various Koreans shared some fundamental aspects.

For one, they drew upon Korea’s “traditional past” and a certain lost innocence or lost virtue (though innocence and virtue are so intimately related) to Sin it had been a lost independent and martial spirit characterized by Koguryo. To the seminal Korean novelist Yi Kwang-su it was the concept of “ch’ong” (忠). Yi also saw the emergence of the “new woman”, liberated from traditional strictures and imbued with the strength that comes with filial piety and blood purity (regarding relations between foreign, i.e. American, soldiers and Korean women). The modernism of Yi Kwang-su and the conservatism of the young student movement is just one of the ironies that occur in attempts to reformulate a past.

In Korea in particular the reformulation of national identity repeats the same themes in different ways. As Jager argues, this is so because, “unlike most modern nations where the contests between various groups have been drawn along ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines, in Korea these contests have been drawn, broadly speaking, between generations” (xiv). For the same reasons do discussions of Korean nationalism often fall into themes of loyalty to one’s past, or to read it another way, filial piety. That is, the failure of the Korean nation has often been interpreted as a failure by Koreans to live up to the perceived standards of an imagined previous generation, be that the martial spirit of Koguryo, the virile patriotism of the Hwarang, or the intuitive heart (ch’ong) - as opposed to the rigid ethics of Confucianism - that supposedly characterized the Korean of bygone days.

This is not linear nor narrative history, indeed the author seems to shun the idea of history as in any sense linear. Jager ultimately expresses hope that out of this and other work being done in the field historians might move beyond history-writing as merely an exercise in mapping cause and effect to a discipline that seeks to “address the relationship between the past and the present” (148). However, this aloofness from the steady march of events that comprises history’s framework I believe ultimately works against the study. One gets the impression that what was occurring in Korea was happening in a vacuum. Indeed, left untied to the events swirling around it we might as well never leave the realm of theory at all. Jager discusses the significance of the new nationalist historiography (ch’ech’eron) that emerged in South Korea among young intellectuals of the 1980s. However, the emergence of this nationalist historiography, which was notably anti-American and anti-capitalist in nature, is given little historical context. But taken out of its historical context, does not intellectual history too becomes simply a series of cause and effect that the author eschews? In other words, the “ch’ech’eron school” becomes simply a reaction to its intellectual forebears, while its ties to historical events are dismissed. To take one example, a comparison between the Korean novelist Yi Kwang-su’s liberating views of women and her capacity for emotional agency (this as a break from the traditional Confucian past, whose straightened emotions had, in Yi’s mind, constrained and warped the Korean soul) and similar sociological and aesthetic changes then taking place in (ironically) China in the wake of the May Fourth Movement, would have gone far in putting Korea’s narrative in a wider, dare we say “historical”, context. Rather than simply a Korean phenomenon, Korean
attempts at reformulating the nation - though to be sure it was this too - through such notions as an emphasis on chong over Confucian propriety must also be seen in the wider context of embracing modernity that was taking place across Asia. In this Korean thinkers no doubt took many cues from the China it was supposedly rejecting.

Perhaps more seriously, the author does not delve much into the power dynamics behind such varying national narratives. The author at times seems content to view things purely in a theoretical light, that is, as imagings whose aims seldom go beyond a sincere and ideal desire to reclaim national identity. Jager does briefly touch upon such ulterior motives in the case of Park Chung Hee and his Samaul (New Village) Movement, commenting on its dual role of modernizing rural Korea while also serving to legitimize military rule. On another level, the author often examines how notions of woman and sexuality were linked to other notions of national essence and national purity. However, to draw out such connections is also to play into the notions of a patriarchal society. Here the author seems willing to take such notions at their face value, as simple attempts to define the national essence in sexual terms, rather than examining their other thematics, such as that of the subjugation of women.

To be fair, however, this is a work of intellectual and cultural history and not a history of modern Korea per se. In this the study succeeds remarkably and stands on its merits as a well-researched and well-written examination of modern Korea's attempts to reformulate its past in the process of building a strong and modernized nation(s). The book benefits as well from an extensive bibliography though its index remains rather Spartan.

Jager would no doubt sympathize with Lewis Namier's much repeated adage that historians "imagine the past and remember the future", only she would not have us relegate this role to historians merely. For Korea, as with other nations, this activity takes place across a range of fields - literature and politics to name a few. Jager's work is a fascinating examination at the ways in which Koreans - to mean primarily "South Koreans" - have reformulated the idea of Koreanness as diagnosis of what ailed Korea. In this examination of the past to find lessons for the future they were performing a very Confucian task.

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Some years back, when the "explosion of French theoris" started to impact studies of Chinese literature in Western academia, there was a strong resistance to the applicability of critical concepts invented in the West to the Chinese context. One often heard arguments by the detractors of theory was we should forget Derrida and Foucault and listen to what the Chinese critics were saying, an argument that was no doubt very valid and urgent. But this is easier said than done. Language barriers aside, the Western scholar of contemporary Chinese studies faces the tremendous challenge of fishing out information of interest from a vast resource of critical writings. Specialized scholarly journals, the bread and butter of academic life for Western scholars, are not a common phenomenon in China. Instead, Chinese critics make themselves heard in newspapers, weekly journals, literary periodicals and other popular serial publications as well as in book form. In recent times, Chinese publishers have realized the need for summary and bibliographical publications that will at least provide a roadmap to the apparently disorderly state of critical writing at the present, and they rush out titles such as the "best whatever of 19xx" (you can fill in the year and the category of writing). Whatever the motif on the part of Chinese publishers, such titles as the one I am reviewing here are a welcome development as they increase the accessibility of Chinese critical resources to scholarly readers outside China.

The two editors of Selected Critical Essays of the 1990s are noted literary critics based in Shanghai, which lends credibility to the project. A brief but thoughtful introduction written by Yang Yang explains the editorial thinking behind the book. In broad strokes, Yang tries to draw the difference between literary criticism of the 1980s and that of the 1990s. According to Yang, literary criticism has experienced a transformation in the last decade. While it remained a centered discourse and particularly benefited from its close relationship with the grand narrative of modernization in earlier years of the New Era, literary criticism has now become de-centered and de-politicized, operating in an intentional distance between itself and the dominant ideology. The word that Yang uses repeatedly is "fragmentation" (fenlie 分裂), which manifests itself in areas such as style (neologisms), targets (non-verbal text), and medium (internet and
salon forums). Another interesting example of Yang's characterization of fragmentation is what he calls the "territorialization" of criticism in which the popular sayings of "how Beijing [the rated capital], zhuji Longji [the golden boulevard], and jiushang [the corner]" are coined to describe the different concerns of the critics based in these places. It is clear that fragmentation does not carry a negative connotation for Yang. Rather, it is a desired objective of critical writing that reflects the vastly changed political and cultural landscape in the aftermath of China's rapid economic growth of recent years.

Yet fragmentation does not mean the absence of unifying concerns that motivate the Chinese critic. The editors identify seven common topics that they use to organize the thirty-eight essays included in the book. The authors of these essays make up a list of who's who in Chinese criticism today and they range from established names to rising stars. The seven topics are "postmodernism and the question of modernity," "gender and women's literature," "the position of civil society," "media and popular culture criticism," "the new generation and the new novel," "modern Chinese and genre criticism," and "the historical positioning of contemporary literature." One noteworthy editorial feature is that each of these topics is led off by a multi-author roundtable discussion, evidence of the proliferating salon forum that doubtless reflects the influence of television talk shows. What these discussions lack in depth and coherence is made up by the often-provocative exchanges and spontaneous witticism among the participants.

The last section of the book is called "surveys of literary hot spots in the 1990s," which provides summary accounts of seven well-publicized news events involving men of letters. They include the controversy over Jia Pingwa's Shou chun [summer] novel "Feidou [the rated capital]," the posthumous fame of the novelist Wang Xiaobo [the rated capital], the re-publication of Hao Ran's [the rated capital] propaganda epic novel "Jingguang Dadao [golden boulevard]," the law suit between the novelist Han Shaogong [the rated capital] and the critic Zhang Yiyu [the rated capital], and Wang Gan [the rated capital] over the latter's accusation of plagiarism involving Han's novel "Maqiao cidian [Maqiao dictionary]," and the celebrity hooligan literature writer Wang Shao's [the rated capital] very public duel with another celebrity hooligan novelist Jin Yong [the rated capital]. Apart from offering some light reading in contrast to the rest of the book, this section has plenty of journalistic value and bibliographic information that will benefit scholars interested in the writers in question.

The preeminence of the issue of postmodernism is perhaps indicated by the first order of attention that it receives in the book. Of the four entries on this topic, Wang Yurenhua's [the rated capital] paper, "Chinese postmodernism criticism in the 1990s," offers a bird's eye view of the development of Chinese postmodernism as a critical discourse and its profound influence on the Chinese critic's language and mode of thinking vis-a-vis the critics' relationship with the text. Zhang Yiyu [the rated capital] demonstrates vividly how a postmodern critic works in his essay "Questioning Modernity: A Trend in the Literature of the 1990s [Dai xiangdai de xiangyan]." He starts by telling a personal story of experiencing Rodin's famous sculpture "The Thinker." In the early 1990s, a mere mechanical copy of Rodin's work brought boundless excitement because it was perceived to be a representation of the spirit of modernity and cultural renaissance. Yet ten years later standing on the corner of a crowded Beijing commercial street and before the original on loan from France, Zhang feels only numb disappointment. The private realization that he has outlived his youthful fantasy of the West then launches Zhang into a deconstruction of the modernity project itself in which the intellectual has always played a central role. Zhang argues with powerful close readings of a number of writers that the Chinese postmodern is a continuous farewell to some fundamental building blocks of modernism such as the myth of the author, the intellectual as the bearer of the truth, the enlightenment impulse, and the universality of Western values. Even though such a description of the Chinese postmodern dangles dangerously close to a version of Chinese essentialism, it certainly accurately reflects the Chinese intellectual's renewed anxiety over the Western cultural penetration of Chinese society in the age of globalization.

The rise of women's writing is one of the most celebrated literary achievements in the 1990s. From the re-energized Zhang Jie [the rated capital] and Can Xue [the rated capital] to the newcomers such as Lin Daiyu [the rated capital], Chen Ran [the rated capital], Xu Kun [the rated capital], Chen Ran [the rated capital], and Jiang Zidan [the rated capital], women writers have enjoyed a popularity at least rivaling their male counterparts, if not already surpassing them in some cases. The challenge for the Chinese critic is to find a whole new vocabulary to describe this diverse group of women writers. Dai Jinhua's [the rated capital] essay "Majian de xianshi [Women's consciousness]" demonstrates vividly how a postmodern critic works in his essay "Questioning Modernity: A Trend in the Literature of the 1990s [Dai xiangdai de xiangyan]." He starts by telling a personal story of experiencing Rodin's famous sculpture "The Thinker." In the early 1990s, a mere mechanical copy of Rodin's work brought boundless excitement because it was perceived to be a representation of the spirit of modernity and cultural renaissance. Yet ten years later standing on the corner of a crowded Beijing commercial street and before the original on loan from France, Zhang feels only numb disappointment. The private realization that he has outlived his youthful fantasy of the West then launches Zhang into a deconstruction of the modernity project itself in which the intellectual has always played a central role. Zhang argues with powerful close readings of a number of writers that the Chinese postmodern is a continuous farewell to some fundamental building blocks of modernism such as the myth of the author, the intellectual as the bearer of the truth, the enlightenment impulse, and the universality of Western values. Even though such a description of the Chinese postmodern dangles dangerously close to a version of Chinese essentialism, it certainly accurately reflects the Chinese intellectual's renewed anxiety over the Western cultural penetration of Chinese society in the age of globalization.

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Sihe in 1994, minjian, which in English translation is somewhere between “folk tradition” and “civil society,” is the most controversial and exciting neologism in the cultural criticism of the 1990s. The excitement comes from its potential to de-link literature from the discourse of power and to “return” literature to a de-centered and de-ideologized place, but what that place is and what the return means for literature in general remains unclear and elusive. More importantly, critics disagree vehemently among themselves about the term’s invocation of a purified aesthetic context for literature that never existed in modern China. Perhaps the very power of minjian comes from its overarching ambitions and its conceptual plasticity. It is a transitional word that does not have a definable destination, and it stands for the Chinese critic’s tireless efforts to grapple with a new reality that increasingly defies categorization and to imagine a future that is frighteningly uncertain. Is this the voice of the Chinese critic for which we have been waiting? Chen Sihe and Yang Yang’s book invites interested Western scholars to respond.

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