

epidemic-causing deities. On the methodological side, I had hoped for greater clarity on two points. First, Rotermund does not adequately situate the conceptualization of smallpox within the larger context of concepts of the body, and is thereby unable to indicate the epistemological boundaries within which people—from doctors to *yamabushi* to ordinary folk—might have conceived of disease and thus come to accept as valid what we regard today as extraordinary or incredible treatments. Second, he should have further elucidated matters concerning the *hayari-gami* and their transformation from evil to compassionate beings. This is an old tradition one finds in medieval poetry (which had a strong incantatory character), and which is also expressed in the historical transformation of Kitano, probably the greatest of all Japanese wrathful spirits. Perhaps Rotermund will, in future works, provide further explanation on this point based on comparative studies of the principal *hayari-gami* of the Edo period.

On the level of method, my main criticism is simple: the book is hopelessly disorganized, with the discussion jumping without respite from one topic to another and from one historical period to another. The only part of the book free of this confusion is the discussion of prints and texts. A careful reshuffling of themes and ideas is all that would have been required to present this book as what it actually is beneath all the disorder: one of the better studies on folk traditions concerning epidemics.

REFERENCE CITED

HASHIMOTO Hakuju

- 1810 *Kokuji dandoku-ron* 國字斷毒論. Volume 7 of *Nihon shomin seikatsu shiryō shūsei* 日本庶民生活資料集成, 30 vols. Tokyo: San'ichi Shobō.
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CHINA

CAN XUE. *Old Floating Cloud: Two Novellas*. Foreword by Charlotte Innes. Translated by Ronald R. Janssen and Jian Zhang. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991. xx+269 pages. Cloth US \$41.95; ISBN 0-8101-0974-3. Paper US\$16.95; ISBN 0-8101-0988-3.

Contemporary Chinese writer Can Xue continues to entertain and perplex readers in this intriguing pair of novellas published in English translation. This new offering builds nicely upon the author's earlier short-story collection, *Dialogues in Paradise*, but the attempt to stretch similar storytelling techniques and strategies over these more lengthy narratives may weary some readers. Encountering scenes and characters in these pages that repeatedly highlight gore and horror is often uncomfortably similar to stumbling barefoot upon fleshy protrusions—weblike, spidery, and ambiguous—strewn maliciously in our path on the bottom of a dark ocean floor. Such sensations are strangely ill-fitting with anything even remotely human. But presumably that is the very idea: drastic metaphors are required to picture what life is like in today's China for massive numbers of people.

Both novellas, *Yellow Mud Street* and *Old Floating Cloud*, function as folklorish parables, and readers sensitive to Chinese literary connections will sense in the author's devices and formulae a harkening back to the great storytelling traditions of the Tang

and Sung dynasties with their tales of ghosts and tyrants. Closer to our time, Can Xue appears at home with postmodernist literary practices that mix content with expression. Somehow Marshall McLuhan's dictum that the medium is the message never seems very far from us here. *Yellow Mud Street* in particular appears to be conscious of both its content—the prying eyes of party politics, the frequently animal-like behavior of the masses, the gross disconnectedness if not rank absurdity of ordinary daily events—and its inner literary realities: repetitive images of stench, anxiety, and human degradation; an obsession with animalistic descriptions and metaphors of illness; and annoying verbal violence in dialogues. This joining of substance and form in fiction climaxes finally in a gigantic nonclimax, an adamant refusal to provide forward movement or any credible solution for problems suggested in the plotting and characterization.

Readers should stiffen their resistance to scatological play, which the text comes close to wallowing in. Not only are we asked to accommodate a repeated hoard of animals (maggots, snakes, pigs, crows, spiders, bats, fleas, wasps, crows, crabs, and scorpions, to name but a few) that overwhelm the human characters in the stories, but our sensitivities collide again and again with references to bodily functions and excrement.

The district head walked down the street. Two sulfa-poisoned patients lay along the curb. They were having a contest to see who could spit the highest. When the sputum fell back into their own faces, they made a fuss, yelling and rolling around, smearing their faces with dirt . . . (170)

Yellow Mud Street displays a proclivity for metaphors of health or illness, with a tone of hypochondria running throughout the novella (McLuhan's *medium*?). While residents of the street are particularly prone to cancer, they may suffer from various unspecified disorders. "He belched and left the restaurant. The whole day his stomach churned as if he had a rag inside," comments our narrator (139). A more grisly (and typical) depiction:

After eating some peppers, old lady Qi felt an itching on her scalp. With one scratch, she peeled off a small wrinkled piece of skin dripping with blood. . . . Her scalp was wet and had started swelling. Before long it had swollen into a soft bun. It dimpled at a slight touch. (162)

In the independent narrative *Old Floating Cloud*, where we find a continual obsession with animals and health, unanswered neighborhood needs like road repair and rubbish disposal hint at a lack of responsibility on the part of local authorities. Characters whisper back and forth about solutions to such problems, but action is seldom taken. Relations between families are riddled with tension. And, if the word *mother* is taken as a poetic emblem for *country*, and *father* for *populace*, what are we to make of these lines, lifted from the final paragraphs of the text?

The cracking sound may have been her mother's skull. The millstones turned; the corpse became a thin layer of paste, oozing slowly down the edge. When the south wind carried the bloody smell to the little room, Ru-hua could see death approach.

"Mother . . ." She suddenly had a strange feeling in her throat and had a fantasy of calling out. She held her breath and gave out a funny, clumsy imitation.

In the yard, her father was still running while vomiting leeches. (268–69)

Old Floating Cloud deserves attention. Its mingling of the folklore elements valued by ancient Chinese storytellers and its hard-driven parabolic references outweigh its occasional ungainly formulations. Although it is too soon to name Can Xue a successor to Lu Xun, surely it is fair to consider her an innovative and brave experimentalist with a flair for splashing bright, provocative, and disturbing portraits upon the canvas of contemporary Chinese fiction.

REFERENCE CITED:

CAN XUE

1989 *Dialogues in paradise*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

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YEN PING-CHIU. *Chinese Demon Tales: Meanings and Parallels in Oral Tradition*. Harvard Dissertations in Folklore and Oral Tradition, edited by Albert B. Lord. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1990. xiv+194 pages. Appendix, Chinese texts, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$70.00; ISBN 0-8240-2529-6.

The construction of theoretical bridges between Chinese and Western literary systems has long posed a challenge to scholars of literature and folklore. While European folklorists have historically undertaken a great deal of cross-cultural comparison between Chinese and Western folk traditions, this has tended to take the form of fitting Chinese materials to Western theoretical molds. Yen's *Chinese Demon Tales*, the published version of his 1971 Ph.D. dissertation, tends to do the same, applying the theories of Albert Lord and Mircea Eliade to a group of classical Chinese narratives.

Using LORD's formulaic theory of oral narrative (1960), Yen identifies a consistently recurring pattern of formulaic themes in Chinese tales of otherworldly journeys. Especially prominent among these themes are those of illness or dismemberment, the initiation or precipitation of the journey itself, magical helpers, knowledge acquired in the otherworld, and illness cured. Lord's theories are again shown to be applicable in the Chinese context, indicating the oral origins of the texts. (In fact, Yen's dissertation was written before the appearance of C. H. WANG's work in this area [1974].)

The recurrence of these themes leads Yen to conclude that they hold some significance for the culture that produced the tales. In his strongest and most innovative chapter, "Meanings in Chinese Tradition," Yen identifies specific religious and ritual elements in the themes that he says refer to ancient and specifically Chinese traditions of shamanism. Drawing on historical accounts of shamans (*wu* 巫), he demonstrates that the later otherworldly narratives are analogues of the older traditions of shamanic ritual. He closely compares historical and literary texts using linguistic, literary, and philological tools, establishing the existence of a complex

transmutation from a traditional ritual performance to a traditional narrative . . . [The] ritual aspect of a performance as experienced and reported by performers has been highly aestheticized in a verbal form, the presentation of which differs from narrative to narrative, while each narrative claims its identity with the traditional ritual by its basic thematic pattern. (93)