

BOOK REVIEW

Questioning the Chinese Model: Oppositional Political Novels in Early Twenty-First Century China

Zhansui Yu. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023. 266 pp. \$70.00 (hbk). ISBN 9781487544348

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Zhansui Yu's *Questioning the Chinese Model: Oppositional Political Novels in Early Twenty-First Century China* showcases a group of well-known Chinese writers who critique the post-Mao Chinese political economy through the means of fiction. Dubbing those fictional works "oppositional political novels," Yu offers a crucial insight that critique of the post-socialist Chinese political economy is not the reserve of exiled Chinese political dissidents and West-based academics but is also a well-engaged concern among some heavyweight intellectuals who reside within China and negotiate the authorities creatively. Yu's main argument is that those selective few intellectuals are taking on the Chinese model – or what Pei Minxin in his *China's Trapped Transition* (Harvard University Press, 2006) calls "developmental autocracy" – in toto, going beyond finding flaws with official corruption and shortcomings of its despotic ruling elites. Taking their departure from the temperate "anti-corruption novels" of a previous era, the "oppositional political novels," according to Yu, question the fundamentals of the system as manifested in its "political dictatorship, state predation, and stark hedonism" (p. 174). Yu convincingly shows that even as state-promoted nationalism and popular confidence in China's international stature sway the masses to embrace the party-state for its delivery of material successes, some intellectuals within China are piercing through the veneer of state propaganda and seeing the causes for regime decline and systemic decay.

The book is well organized into three parts. The introduction offers "oppositional political novels" as the theoretical framework and a principle for inclusion and exclusion of fictional works produced in recent years from mainland-based Chinese writers. The first chapter accounts for the sociopolitical background for the emergence of this genre of fiction. It is by far the best chapter of the book as it brings together a rich list of references – sociological and anthropological investigations of the Chinese political economy since the 1990s. Yu also innovatively discerns a tripartite typology of the post-socialist Chinese political economy as consisting of the Party, the intellectuals and the people, and explains how this trilateral relationship has evolved into a predatory Party terrorizing and co-opting the intellectuals while ruthlessly exploiting the labouring masses for economic growth. The introduction and the first chapter make up the first part as they combine to show the material basis with which fiction writers engage in their "oppositional" politics. The second part, consisting of five chapters, offers close readings of five novels which Yu considers to be illustrations of "oppositional political novels." In chronological order of the works' publication time, the five writers showcased are Jiang Rong, Yan Lianke, Hu Fayun, Chan Koonchung and Yu Hua. In this part, Yu mostly relies on the methodology of reading the novels as political/national allegories. The third part, that is the epilogue, attempts to account for the reasons that those novels were published or circulated under a cultural regime that is well known to be intolerant of politically engaged criticism. This part is the weakest as Yu offers little in the manner of empirical evidence. The explanation mostly hinges on the hypothesis that censorship provokes and produces counter-

ensorship strategies and techniques, which in turn push those fictions to creative extremes. While the hypothesis is legitimate, the lack of empirical evidence makes the argument appear disembodied.

The book suffers from its loose temporal demarcations, in both the author's phraseology and their data selection. Phrases such as "today's China" and "present-day China" appear scores of times in the book, making the reader wonder about the tremendous changes that have taken place in China's political economy as well as cultural economy under Xi Jinping's rule. For a critique of "the Chinese model," which refers to the era when the Chinese economy saw rapid growth, Yu's political commentary frequently spills over to critique the dictatorship and oppression in the Maoist years, especially in the chapter on *Wolf Totem*. While Maoist totalitarianism also qualifies as a "model" given Maoism's trappings in the global 1960s and beyond, as discussed in Julia Lovell's *Maoism: A Global History* (Knopf, 2019), revolutionary Maoism and the Dengist Chinese developmental state gained global tractions for starkly different reasons and therefore should be treated as two separate subjects.

Some conceptual tools Yu references in sociology also do not congeal with his own subject matter. For instance, Yu's use of Gramsci's concept of "organic intellectuals" (meaning the manufacturers of sociopolitical consent in a given political economy) (p. 77) detracts from his humanistic condemnation of post-Tiananmen Chinese intellectuals who "sell their souls and conscience to the Party state for power, social status, and wealth" (p. 47). In general, Yu's liberal use of strong terms against the Dengist political economy seems to be more effective in condemning than explaining it. Yu's dispute with Jiang Rong with regard to the impact of the Mongol empire(s) upon human history also shows a limitation of some compartments in the field of Chinese studies. Disparaging that the "Yuan dynasty is one of the shortest major imperial dynasties in Chinese history" (p. 63), Yu seems to be reflecting a parochial Sinology perspective. Viewed in world history perspective and seeing beyond the Sinitic sphere, the Mongol empire(s) was a trans-Eurasian geopolitical conglomerate and a "world order" as proposed by Ayşe Zarakol in her *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Despite those not insignificant issues, Yu's directness in bridging hard-hitting Chinese intellectual poignancy and the country's increasingly opaque political development is a welcome effort in the mapping of politically engaged intellectual expression in late reform-era China. The book can also be gainfully used as a secondary source in an undergraduate syllabus on world literature, especially of the genre of political fiction.