

---

## Book Review: Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China

Clemens Treter

*China Information* 2004 18: 493

DOI: 10.1177/0920203X0401800306

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://cin.sagepub.com/content/18/3/493.citation>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *China Information* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://cin.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://cin.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Nov 19, 2004

[What is This?](#)

**Yomi BRAESTER**, *Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003. xii + 264 pp. ISBN: 080474792X (hbk). Price: £45.50.

With *Witness Against History*, Yomi Braester presents a selection of close readings of 20th-century texts and films ranging from Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman* to Jiang Wen's film *Yangguang canlan de rizi* (In the heat of the sun). The guiding principle of his approach is stated in the preface, where Braester writes — interpreting a comment once made by Lu Xun — that “the power of writing stems ... from the chasm between the text and what it represents, and draws on ambiguity and paradox” (p. ix). What Braester is looking for are therefore passages of the texts that belie the texts' purported intentions and their alleged ability to be read as testimonies of a certain reality — a method that is theoretically inspired by deconstruction and well placed in the ongoing debate about Chinese approaches to realism that has been triggered off by Marston Anderson's *Limits of Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Although the book's nine chapters, which could also be read as individual studies, come in two parts (“May Fourth and Its Discontents” and “Wounded Memories”) the volume actually consists of three units with chapter four on “Maoist Semiotics and Public Discourse in Early PRC Film and Drama” working as a binding link. The first three chapters explore the contradictions of the May Fourth Movement's attempts to disseminate Enlightenment ideas. Here Braester starts with a rereading of some of the most well-known passages from Lu Xun's *Nahan* collection. He particularly elaborates the aporia of interpreting the *Diary of a Madman* that remains “an unsolved riddle at the center of modern Chinese literature” (p. 53). Chapter two focuses on early 20th-century theatrical and cinematographic representations of Pan Jinlian, especially on Ouyang Yuqian's play *Pan Jinlian* that turns the heroine into a woman with modern sensibilities living in a traditional context. I am not so sure whether the concept of “Witness against History” fits very well for this chapter, but what Braester shows clearly is that the Pan Jinlian character and its various 20th-century re-creations point to the cultural crisis that China went through at the time of the different dramas' writing. The same is valid for chapter three where the author gives an inspiring account of the various layers of meaning that simultaneously dominated Chinese cinema in the 1930s. He concentrates on Ma-Xu Weibang's *Yeban gesheng* (Song at midnight). The film can be read as a call to revolution but at the same time it also

questions cinema's ability to serve a revolutionary purpose, as cinema always will have an almost natural draw to the spectacular and the fantastic.

Using the example of *Hongdeng ji* (The red lantern) it is then shown in chapter four how "bearing witness against the dominant view of history was effectively silenced" (p. 127) in the PRC by "Maoist hermeneutics" especially during the Cultural Revolution — an argument that is largely correct but that could be more differentiated if the author would take into consideration the existence of "underground literature" such as the hand-copied books (*shouchao ben*) with their science fiction or spy stories.

Part II concentrates on the aftermath of these "Maoist hermeneutics" and their concrete political and social consequences. First the narrative strategies of a series of late 1970s and early 1980s films are explored. They exhibit the failure of the Cultural Revolution's victims to come to terms with their experiences — special attention is paid to Yang Yanjin's films *Ku'nao ren de xiao* (Bitter laughter) and *Xiao jie* (The alley). Then Zhang Xianliang's *Wo de putishu* (My bodhi tree) is introduced as a sophisticated example of scar literature that "demonstrates the paradoxes of testimony after the Cultural Revolution and the dialectics of bearing witness to the untestifiable" (p. 156). After an excursion into Taiwanese history and its complex relation to the events on the mainland looking at authors such as Chen Yingzhen and Liu Daren, the focus is again shifted to cultural trends from the PRC. Yu Hua's *Wangshi yu xingfa* (Past and punishment) is presented as an example of avant-garde fiction's break-up with realistic interpretations and its play with the absurd, while Braester's reading of *In the Heat of the Sun* in the final chapter makes clear that even discourses of nostalgic transfiguration of the Maoist past are not to be trusted.

Albeit the concept of "witness against history" sometimes remains an artificial frame to Braester's analyses, his interpretations provide fresh insights into a number of not so well-known texts from 20th-century China. Furthermore, his approach of reading modern Chinese literature against the grain may serve as a good starting point for additional studies. Therefore *Witness against History* can be recommended as inspiring reading to scholars and graduate students of modern Chinese culture.

CLEMENS TRETER, *Sinology, Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich, Germany*