

**Hermann, Marc:** *Leib und (A-)Moral. Ideologie- und Moralkritik im Werk von Zhang Ailing.* (Lun Wen – Studien zur Geschichte und Literatur in China; 16). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013, 271 S., ISBN 978-3-447-06912-0.

Reviewed by **Justyna Jaguscik**, Abteilung für Sinologie, Asien-Orient-Institut, Universität Zürich, Zürichbergstrasse 4, 8032 Zürich, Switzerland, E-mail: justyna.jaguscik@aoi.uzh.ch

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Marc Hermann's monograph has been published by Harrassowitz Verlag in its prestigious "Lun Wen" series. Within this framework, the publisher presents outstanding dissertations in the fields of pre-modern and modern Chinese studies recently defended in German-speaking academia. Hermann's rich work undoubtedly deserves the attention of all readers interested in the intersections of modern Chinese literature and philosophy. Drawing upon examples from texts by the popular female writer Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 (Eileen Chang, 1920–1995), the author sheds light on critical and, more specifically, anti-ideological dimensions of her works. Furthermore, next to the widely acknowledged (also by Zhang herself) feeling of desolation and melancholy that pervade her writings, he discovers, in his own words, a "post-ideological joy".

One cannot disagree with Hermann's opinion that to date Zhang remains one of the very few Chinese writers whose fame has crossed the walls of Asian studies departments. There are several reasons behind Zhang's popularity. Aside from her literary talent, her exceptional linguistic skills made the bilingual multicultural writer accessible to an English-speaking readership. Last but not least, the controversial film adaptation of her late story "Lust, Caution" by the renowned Taiwanese-born director Ang Lee was awarded the prestigious Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2007.

Within the field of Chinese studies there is an abundance of academic works dedicated to Zhang Ailing. C. T. Hsia (Xia Zhiqing 夏志清, 1921–2013) introduced her during the Cold War era to a Western and Taiwanese professional readership in his ground-breaking *History of Modern Chinese Fiction, 1917–1957* (1961). However, due to political reasons in mainland China, the "Zhang fever" only broke out there in the 1990s. Since then, her writings have re-entered for good the field of vision of academic and lay readers. In Hermann's own words, "today Zhang Ailing has arrived in the middle of China's consumer society" (p. 7).

As all details from Zhang's biography may be easily found elsewhere, Hermann keeps his introduction to her life and works reasonably brief. This is also understandable in the light of his disapproval of narrow biographical criticism. Even if he does not use the term, Hermann's approach may be

described as seeking its basis in concepts and not in a larger methodological or theoretical framework. Consequently, Hermann devotes the entire third chapter, which follows after short introductory and biographical remarks, to an analysis of a variety of concepts that are crucial for his discussion of Zhang's writing. He introduces them to the reader as follows: the material body versus the felt body<sup>1</sup>, atmosphere and presence, *kynicism* (philosophical Cynicism), idealism and cynicism<sup>2</sup>, ideology and critique of morality, post-ideological joy, as well as narcissism. In the subsequent parts of the monograph, Hermann consistently develops his analyses around this conceptual matrix. This list of terms already indicates that it is an erudite reading nourished by the rich tradition of German philosophical thinking.

In his theoretical endeavor Hermann focuses on texts by Zhang Ailing that have often been neglected by literary critique. He rightfully observes that, in spite of the aforementioned popularity of the author, theoretical discussion of her texts has remained paradoxically biased towards the most famous collection of short stories *Chuanqi* 传奇 (Romances, 1944) and, concurrently, guided by simplifying biographical approaches. Due to these reasons, Hermann opens the interpretative part of his dissertation with a chapter dedicated to Zhang's collection of essays *Liuyan* 流言 (Written on water, 1945).

Hermann's reading centers around the aforementioned list of concepts, with which he claims to have embraced the leitmotifs of Zhang's essayist writing. First he points to a tension, common in many of her works, between the feelings of melancholy caused by transience and joy about the "here and now". Furthermore, Hermann foregrounds the *kynical* and anti-ideological impulses in Zhang's writing. He highlights the embeddedness of her texts in the landscape of the modern city of Shanghai, which, with all its dazzling colors and acrid smells, appeals to all bodily senses. Consequently, the experience of being-in-the-world of the writing persona that resonates in her texts becomes a distinctly corporeal (*leiblich*) one. Furthermore, the characters that populated her literary imagination were often driven by inherently contradictory impulses or bodily drives, and as such cannot be easily approached in conventional ethical terms.

In the course of his argumentation, Hermann convincingly combines the neo-phenomenological terminology of Hermann Schmitz with Peter Sloterdijk's

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann's reading of texts by Zhang is rooted in the theoretical terminology of Hermann Schmitz (born 1928), a German philosopher who developed a systematic phenomenological theory of the felt body (*Leib*) in his *System of Philosophy* (1964–1980). To date only one of Schmitz's essays has been translated into English. Whenever possible, I adopt the already existing English translations of Schmitz's concepts. For more see Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby (2011).

<sup>2</sup> These concepts originate from *Critique of Cynical Reason* by Peter Sloterdijk (1983).

understanding of the *kynic* as the one who is countering idealism with her bodily presence and, sometimes, sheer physiology. Accordingly, he claims, from the broader sociopsychological point of view, Zhang's *kynicism* undermines patriotic ideals, and even more prominently, the order of the patriarchal society with its moral double standards (p. 41).

With this statement, Hermann adds a new dimension to his discussion, that of gender criticism. He discusses in detail the *kynical* aesthetics of Zhang's writing, for which he reserves the attribute of femininity. This feminine aesthetics, in Hermann words, introduces a gaze from below, which eagerly embraces all trivial aspects of life as well as its purely sensual side. In contrast, the masculine aesthetics celebrates the sublime and the heroic of the *Übermensch*. Significantly, Hermann remains conscious of the risk of imposing his own aesthetic categories on Zhang. Consequently, he quotes excessively from her essay "Ziji de wenzhang" 自己的文章 (Writings of one's own, 1944) in order to show that his reading agrees with Zhang's own understanding of the notion of feminine writing. She described it as grounded in a timeless feeling of placidity (*Beschaulichkeit*, *anwen* 安穩) and, sometimes, desolation. Hermann associates the latter mood with what he sees as another crucial feature of Zhang's aesthetics: the equivocal contrast, which counters, according to him, the black-and-white dualism intrinsic to any dogmatic reasoning. Subsequently, Hermann connects Zhang's aesthetic feminine perspective with his main argument for the anti-ideological character of her writing, which seems to subvert any great narrative of the modern era with its innate ambivalences.

Nevertheless, Hermann's argumentation in the following part seems disputable from the point of view of feminist or gender-oriented literary criticism. He claims that the categories of "femininity" and "masculinity" which appear in Zhang's aesthetic project should be understood in a non-essentializing way and, furthermore, in accordance with the concept of *écriture féminine* – a feminine mode of writing introduced by Hélène Cixous (pp. 56–57). Even if, correctly in my opinion, he does not explore this slippery theoretical path any further, I wonder how the alleged anti-ideological stance of Zhang Ailing could be connected with Cixous's manifesto "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), the overtly political text from which the idea of *écriture féminine* originates.

Moreover his claim, that "the woman [in Zhang's writing] embodies the felt body (*das Leibliche*), the material (...) and the corporeal (*leibliche*) morality and her humanity is intrinsically embedded in what is [the reality, while] the idealism of men stands for divides, conflicts, and violence" (p. 62) seems to undermine the alleged non-essentializing perspective on sex and gender. Hence, I doubt whether, in Hermann's own words, a re-writing by Zhang

Ailing of the myth of “woman as nature” into the ironic myth of the “divine whore”, (p. 68) does genuinely subvert any conventional order of gender representation. Rather than in a brief critique of gender studies, which seems out of place in this chapter, I would be much more interested in the phenomenological perspective on the distinct female body experience that figures prominently in Zhang Ailing’s works. It is a viewpoint that seems worth inquiring into, as it promises to deliver a new vocabulary for theorizing the sexed body without falling into the trap of gender essentialism.

Even if the focus of Hermann’s monograph is on the less-discussed texts, he devotes the fifth chapter of the monograph to a selection from Zhang’s *Romances*. Instead of repeating the arguments of his predecessors, he proposes an innovative reading of some of the stories from the collection which revolves around one of his key concepts listed above: narcissism. Drawing upon examples from one of the most popular stories, “Hong meigui yu bai meigui” 红玫瑰与白玫瑰 (“Red rose, white rose”, 1944). Hermann demonstrates how, in the figure of the protagonist Tong Zhenbao, Zhang had delivered a masterful representation of male narcissism. Furthermore, Hermann skillfully moves in his discussion of the narcissistic subject between different registers: the cultural, metapsychological and socio-political. Narcissism turns into a description of modern man’s self-positioning as an omnipotent superman in perfect command of his inner and outer world. In Hermann’s opinion, with the female protagonist of the story, Wang Jiaorui, Zhang has introduced a new outlook on feminine subjectivity into modern Chinese literature, which is embedded in the felt body and as such lays bare the powerful illusion of the masculine ideal self.

In the longest sixth chapter Hermann turns to a close reading of Zhang Ailing’s novels, which were strongly influenced by great political projects, those of Maoism and anticommunism of the Cold War era. In the light of his major claim about the anti-ideological tenor of Zhang’s works, this part is of crucial importance. In the opening section of this chapter, Hermann delivers an insightful analysis of texts that were, in his opinion, rejected by the majority of literary critics for being nothing more than an ideological masquerade by a desperate author with a dangerously incorrect class background and a hazardous private past. Hermann makes the parallel reading of the original version of the novel *Shiba chun* 十八春 (*Eighteen Springs*, 1950 in mainland China) and its later revised version, which appeared in Taiwan in 1968, his point of departure for the in-depth discussion of these two texts. He argues that the latter version, where all previously central positive Communist ideologemes are absent, may be read as a negative critique of ideology (*negative Ideologiekritik*). Furthermore, Hermann observes, the relative ease with which Zhang managed to re-write

the original texts shows that, rather than simply to discard the novel as act of conformism, one may read it against the grain and find the “true” authorial voice behind the ideological veil. Thus, in the subsequent reading of the novel, Hermann resorts to the previously introduced aesthetic categories, such as the equivocal contrast that counters the typical sharp contrast of social realism, between heroes and villains. He suggests that, simply by changing the ending of the second version of the novel, Zhang Ailing re-created a work that fits perfectly into her repertoire, with its mood of sadness and desolation over human impotence.

In an interesting move, Hermann turns in the closing part of the chapter to the discussion of two sister novels by Zhang Ailing, which were sponsored by the US Information Service: *The Rice Sprout Song* and *Chidi zhi lian* 赤地之恋 (*Naked Earth*, 1954). In both cases she completed a Chinese and an English version of the book manuscript. Hermann focuses his discussion on the first novel, which he interprets as not simply an anti-Communist, but much more anti-ideological work. He argues that the prevalent reading of the novel as having an anti-Communist bias is too myopic. Hermann suggests that, in *The Rice Sprout Song*, Zhang shows the inhumanity essential to any ideological stance, be it Communist or other. He puts forth that, with the described imposition of the linguistic greed of Communism on the village, paradoxically the old power structures have remained largely intact. Hence, he argues, Zhang focused in her writing on various strategies implemented by the villagers in order to adjust to the new political system that had been forced on them. Subsequently, Hermann identifies (self-)deception or hypocrisy as the central theme of the book, especially in the face of the famine. The novel shows clearly that, from the point of view of those in power, an ideologically correct performance was much more important to the authorities than peoples’ genuine thoughts and emotions. Again, Hermann points to Zhang’s fondness for the *kynical* worldview. To her, the corporeal embeddedness of her (female) protagonists in their lived world was much closer than in any idealist stances represented by the propagators of the new ideological regime.

In the closing part of this chapter Hermann discusses some critical features shared by both novels, *The Rice Sprout Song* and *Naked Earth*, which seem strikingly relevant even from today’s perspective. On the one hand, the cynical focus on correct word-performance, and, on the other hand, the party members’ narcissistic fascination with power and symbolic or material signs of social privilege.

In the closing chapter, Hermann delivers his reading of what is perhaps Zhang Ailing’s internationally best-known story, “Se, jie” 色, 戒 (“Lust, Caution”, 1978). The success of the loose film adaptation of the text by Ang Li triggered a global wave of interest in the author’s writing. Hermann remains consequently faithful to

his conceptual grid and discusses the feminine aesthetics of Zhang's writing as anti-ideological and a-moral. According to him, in this story she deconstructed the revolutionary and romantic ideals shared by many of the patriotic "new youth" in China at the beginning of the twentieth century. Finally, she left no space for illusions: in this text love, revolution and any other "great narratives" dissolve into emptiness.

This short overview of Marc Hermann's work is selective and as such does not do justice to its theoretical depth. It is an ambitious and dense text, but, as should also be stressed here, at the same time one that proves beyond doubt the author's exceptional linguistic and translation skills. The clear and conscious language will make the book accessible not only for senior scholars of Chinese literature, but also for students as well as lay readers interested in modern Chinese literature and philosophy. The author did not spare any efforts to make his work comprehensible, without compromising in terms of theoretical sophistication. For example, going against the already widespread convention of leaving quotations in English untranslated, he proposes apt renditions of all non-German text quoted in the book. In conclusion, *Leib und (A-)Moral* is a challenging work and a much-welcome, insightful enrichment to the corpus of secondary literature on Zhang Ailing. It is worth reading and discussing, especially from the perspective of gender-oriented literary criticism and from the history of women's literature in Chinese.

## References

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