

# Books

## ***Significant Other: Staging the American in China.***

By Claire Conceison. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004; 297 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

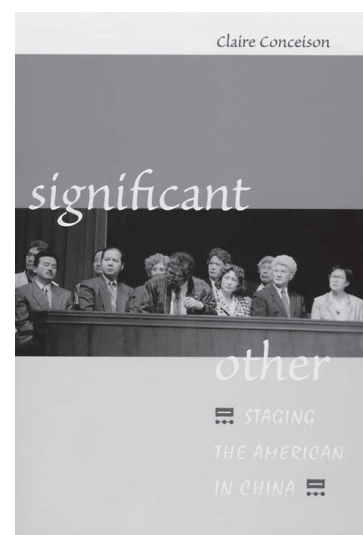
Claire Conceison's *Significant Other: Staging the American in China* is a groundbreaking study of identity politics and cultural representation in Chinese theatre. Conceison illustrates practices of signification of the "foreign Other" in China through the analysis of seven contemporary spoken dramas featuring American characters or other portrayals of American culture. Indeed, as the title of this cogently argued study suggests, "the American" has often represented a very "significant Other" in Chinese international politics and popular imagination.

Specifically, Conceison addresses an "open-ended," "self-consciously temporal," and "paradoxical" practice of "othering" that she categorizes as Occidentalism (54). The complexities of the Occidentalist paradigm are expounded in chapter 1 ("Setting the Sino-American Stage") and chapter 2 ("Occidentalism (Re)considered"). Here Conceison provides the cultural-historical context and theoretical framework of her inquiry. She meticulously reassesses previous discussions of Occidentalism such as those by Edward Said, Xiaomei Chen, and James Carrier, thereby challenging dominant perceptions of both Occidentalism and its older and better-known sibling—Orientalism. She thus provides for the first time a systematic overview of the genesis and evolution of Occidentalism as a critical discourse and—most crucially—compels readers to think of it in new, thought-provoking ways.

Occidentalism is far more than a "response" to or a "reversal" of Orientalism, Conceison argues. She foregrounds Occidentalism's connection to Orientalism in terms of their relationships to the "speaking subject" and "othered object," yet rejects the notion of an East "incapable of othering" as well as conventional dichotomies of an "othering" West versus an "othered" East (50). In fact, China has long been a prolific producer of images of the foreign Other and not merely a passive victim of Orientalist scrutiny.

Referring to the widely accepted assumption that "representations of an objectified Other reveal as much, if not more, about the objectifying subject as the 'othered' object" (42), Conceison underscores the necessity of exploring the impact of such figurations on the "othered" community, contending that "such images, while articulating national and/or cultural identity [...] also do indeed speak for the Occidental Other in addition to the Oriental Self" (48). This is a decisive contribution to current conceptions of the Orientalist/Occidental paradigm.

Dramatic shifts in Sino-American relations occurred over the period in which the plays surveyed by Conceison were produced (1987–2002). For instance, the intensification of US-Taiwan diplomatic relations as signaled by a visit of Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui to the US in 1995 provoked indignant reactions in Beijing, for the US was seen as tacitly acknowledging Taiwan's claims to sovereignty against the Chinese mainland. Tensions between the PRC and the US heightened further following the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. These events impacted heavily on the configuration of Chinese Occidentalism, as reflected by the plays scrutinized in Conceison's book. These revealing texts operate as catalysts



of the varying institutional, intellectual, and popular sentiments that surfaced in the period under examination—from the positive fascination with the American Dream prevailing in the 1980s to a proliferation of Ugly Americans taking the stage a decade later. Conceison underscores the multiple implications of such images through detailed examination of the plays and their production processes.

Chapter 3 (“Immigrant Interculturalism: *China Dream*”) illustrates the largely optimistic perception of the American in 1980s China as expressed by Sun Huizhu and Fei Chunfang’s *Zhongguo meng* (China Dream; 1987), an account of the interethnic romance between Mingming, a Chinese émigré to the United States, and the American Sinophile John. In contrast, Wang Peigong and Wang Gui’s *Da liuyang* (The Great Going Abroad; 1991), discussed in chapter 4 (“Exilic Absurdism: *The Great Going Abroad*”), chronicles the unsettling experiences of a Chinese exile in America, which is portrayed in this instance as a land of danger and alienation. The text delves into tropes of geopathology and traumatic displacement, hence dismantling previous idealistic views of the intercultural encounter while articulating metaphors of intracultural violence. Guo Shixing’s *Niaoren* (Bird Men; 1993), surveyed in chapter 5 (“Cultural Cross-Examination: *Bird Men*”) focuses on the troubled interactions between a bunch of Beijing bird raisers and three American or “Americanized” characters: a Chinese American psychoanalyst, a Caucasian American officer, and a Chinese ornithologist with a Westernized education. The bird raisers’ antiforeign remarks and their “observers’” skeptical attitudes towards them reveal oblique criticism of domestic policies alongside disparaging depictions of American culture and society as consequences of China’s shifting international agendas.

The deterioration of China-US relations that occurred in the mid- to late ’90s is powerfully voiced in the plays examined in chapter 7 (“Anti-Americanism: *Dignity* and *Che Guevara*”): Sha Yexin’s *Zunyan* (Dignity; 1997), and Shen Lin, Huang Jisu, Zhang Guangtian, and Guo Jiangtao’s *Qie Gewala* (Che Guevara; 2000). *Dignity* is a courtroom drama about an overseas Chinese student suing her American employers for mistreatment, whereas *Che Guevara* is a “staged poem” about the iconic Cuban Revolutionary, featuring a group of American “baddies” among the characters.

A crucial shift in terms of identity politics and cultural representation occurs when “real” foreigners eventually are cast to play foreign roles in local productions in place of Chinese actors “in foreign drag” (31), thereby redefining the rules of the (mis)representation game. Early instances of this are Yu Luosheng’s *Peidu furen* (Student Wife; 1995), which is explored in chapter 6 (“American Self-Representation: *Student Wife*”), and Sun Huizhu and Fei Chunfang’s *Qiuqian qingren* (Swing; 2002), the focus of chapter 8 (“Self-Occidentalism: *Swing*”). *Student Wife* addresses the trials endured by a couple of Chinese émigrés after moving in with an American couple—the latter played by two Chinese-speaking foreigners. Likewise, *Swing* shows the turbulent relations between two couples in America—two overseas students from China, and an American-born Chinese and her Caucasian American partner. This last character was once again played by a foreigner and, once again, came across as a fairly villainous one. As Conceison notes, in fact, self-representation does not always engender a debunking of Occidentalism but can also produce unwitting “self-Occidentalizing” acts (198).

Conceison’s assessment of the manifold implications of the elusive yet crucial concept of Occidentalism represents the most valuable and enduring contribution of her monograph. Surely, her comprehensive survey also benefited from her long-time involvement in the Chinese theatre scene, as it transpires from the engaging accounts of her experiences as an “Other” in China as well as the exhaustiveness and variety of bibliographical sources such as records of interviews, unpublished scripts, archival documentation, and other materials concerning the production and reception of the plays. The book also includes a set of photographs of the performances.

Ultimately, the value and scope of Conceison’s critical model extends far beyond the fields of Chinese or theatre studies. As her epilogue on Asian American theatre also suggests, any

discipline engaging with identity politics, cultural translation, and practices of (self-)representation will surely benefit from this study. Otherness is not a single and fixed entity, but a multifaceted and metamorphic one. Thus Conceison's book will assist future scholars in exploring the intricate maze of cultural representation, and make sense of their own "significant Others."

—Rossella Ferrari

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TDR: *The Drama Review* 52:1 (T197) Spring 2008. ©2008  
New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

***Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre.*** By Jill Dolan. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005; 233 pp. \$65.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

I once attended a staged reading in San Francisco; I recall neither the play nor the venue. What I do remember is that it was going badly. The play was a modern-day minstrel show with an African American cast and deployed disparaging stereotypes that were all too familiar to both the audience and the performers. Perhaps because actors typically rehearse staged readings for only a few hours, the play was desperately struggling to find its feet. The anxiety of the racially and ethnically mixed audience was growing by the moment: was this supposed to be funny? Then, in the midst of a particularly offensive chicken-stealing scene, two of the actors were no longer able to suppress their giggles. The audience paused, momentarily stunned, and then dissolved into gales of laughter. We laughed until tears streamed down our faces, until some of us really were weeping, but still laughing, too. I do not want to make too much of this moment: our collective laughter and tears did not serve as evidence of a singular audience experience or perspective. The unexpected and unscripted affective moment did not transcend our differences in favor of a universalized subject position, but it did allow us to recognize ourselves as a "temporary public," and it allowed us, if only for a moment, to laugh in spite of horrific histories (25).

I offer this meditation on my own theatregoing experience as a kind of homage to Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*, in which Dolan's own description of moments she calls "utopian performatives" are descriptive, moving, and evocative. Ever mindful of the ways utopia and humanism have been deployed to coercive and fundamentally conservative ends, Dolan nevertheless works to reclaim affective experiences of hope, collectivity, and *communitas*, both for theatre scholars and for progressives, more generally. The theatrical experience, Dolan proposes, sets the stage for the emergence of the utopian performative, a "'wish'-oriented moment" that performatively enacts the imagining of a better world (6). Dolan builds on J.L. Austin's (1975) use of the performative, in which saying something—as in pronouncing a couple as married—makes it so. That is, the performative enunciation enacts what it claims. But Dolan also resists the absolutism in this framework, emphasizing the political and social dimensions of the utopian performative. She turns to the words of José Muñoz to

