

**Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007**

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Sheldon H. Lu's book *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* is an important contribution to the recent interest of North-American academia in Chinese society and politics. The Chinese experience of modernity, in particular, offers an alternative route, which is an exception to the Western model of modernization. Lu describes this as follows: "Chinese modernity, from the mid-nineteenth century to the twenty first century, is necessarily multifarious and open to many possibilities of narration" (1).

Lu's work is an interdisciplinary study of the Chinese experience of modernity and position in the world political system from the late nineteenth-century Qing era to the recent "market-socialist" China; the so-called "socialism with Chinese characteristics". His multimedia approach draws on Chinese literature, film, art, photography, and video to analyze representations of the body in relation to the wider context of the economic, social and political realms. The goal of the study is to investigate body-politics, which, according to Lu, are a sub-field of biopower and refer to reflections of globalization on a personal level in a specific social context in China. Lu investigates the regulation of desires, bodies, affects, and sexuality in the construction of modernity as embodied in Chinese thought, literature, film and art, which function as a cultural, aesthetic and historic prisms. In other words, Lu examines the various ways in which China is joining "the rest of the world in the production and exhibition of beauty, affect and desire in the contemporary capitalist world-system" (14).

Following the legacy of Foucault's biopower, Negri and Hardt's paradigmatic shift from modern to post-modern, and the emergence of "affective labor," Lu pursues the creation of a new form of biopolitics across national boundaries. He establishes three main points to support this assertion: first is the emergence of the libidinal economy or the economy of affect, which enhances the ability of "flexible citizens" to navigate the geography of the world, and yet how, simultaneously, "this [global biopolitics] subjugates human beings to new forms of commodification, control, exploitation, and victimization" (4). He asserts that the manifestation of the geopolitics of biopower, or "geobiopower" emerges through a process of the "commodification of body; fetishization and consumption of the foreign body, often results from a geopolitical asymmetry in wealth and power" (7). His second point is the possibility that men and women could be "both the agents of change and subjugated to manipulation and domination in the transnational transactions of labor and affect in the experience of globalization" (4). In his third point, Lu wants to clarify that nationality and

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nationalism do not altogether disappear. According to Lu, a polarization is created between “the decoding and deterritorialization of flows of capital and desire” at one end and “the recoding and reterritorialization of old institutions [like the nation-state] at the other” (5-6).

Throughout the book, Lu establishes a fruitful dialogue between the representations of the body in works of art from the late nineteenth century to the twenty first century. However, it should be noted that it is unclear as to which criteria were used for the selection of the works of art. Despite the harmony maintained between the general argument of the book and various forms of art from different periods of time, it appears incoherent in prioritizing only the *affective* forms of labor and omitting the extensive proletarianization of the rural Chinese population, which, in Lu’s own words, has made China “the factory of the world” (197).

One of the significant contributions of the monograph is the dialectic between the emancipating characteristics of globalization, in terms of communication, and the introduction of Western life-styles, tastes, and pleasures, and the increasing gaps in income distribution in society, and the precarious situation of the Chinese poor which is a direct consequence of the global capitalist economy. He reads the *Beauty Writing* at the turn of the twenty first century (chapter 3) as emancipation and redefinition of the urban female body by urban women writers, thus replacing confined citizens with liberated netizens. At the same time, he is hostile to official expressions such as “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and “the great renaissance of the Chinese nation,” whereby the turn to capitalist and diverse economic configurations came along with the maintenance of the one-party state structure, condemning them as “facetious” (208) and “jingoisms” (196).

He raises a discussion of a nostalgia for the socialist past among Chinese citizens and establishes a parallel between the German *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for East Germany) and Chinese *huanjiu* for the socialist past (chapter 7). The nostalgia is especially represented in Chinese cinema (*The Road Home*; *The Marriage Certificate*) and TV-series (*Years of Burning Passion*) as the loss of a sense of community, the commodification of cultural life and the reign of consumerism, and the deterioration of a solidaristic society for the welfare of all. He insists, therefore, that the legacy of the socialist past is still present and will continue as long as globalization causes more disparity and deprivation in Chinese society, despite “all the horrors and tragedies which occurred in the [socialist] period” (144). Furthermore, he points out that the biased depictions of the era, in their most horrifying and inhumane forms from post-Mao literature and cinema, have revealed a failure of the dialectic and the “cunning” of history (144-9).

Lu concludes his argument with a discussion on the notions of *xiaokang* (moderate affluence) and *datong* (non-capitalist globalization), which were elaborated by the pivotal Chinese reformers such as Wang Tao

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and Kang Youwei (Historical Conclusion). In this discussion, *Xiaokang* denotes a relatively peaceful and affluent society, whereas *datong* has been translated as Great Union, Great Harmony, Great Community, and Great Commonwealth (200-1). By concluding with this discussion, Lu articulates that China is on the right track to realize great welfare for its people, by covertly juxtaposing these two concepts against socialism and communism as past ideals of Maoist China.

This argument is worthy of consideration and poses valid questions for further discussion regarding the direction of progress of contemporary Chinese society following China's entrance into the global capitalist regime of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (210). Lu's work would be strengthened by further articulating the notion of *datong* and whether or not contemporary Chinese visual or textual art has any reference to the idea of a great commonwealth for Chinese people.

In the postscript, Lu delineates a genealogy of the idea of "post-socialism" in the Chinese context. However, generally speaking, post-socialism seems to be a questionable concept. Lu's statement deserves attention by saying that post-socialism is not the end of socialism, but rather an expectant present moment of unprecedented social experimentation that looks in two directions: "feeling nostalgia for the revolutionary past even as it enters the doors of the supermarket of the capitalist world" (207). It is important to underscore that post-socialism pertains to perception and affects, in a moment of a perversion of the utopian longing for socialism in collaboration with capitalist profiteering that creates a disproportionate disparity between the haves and have-nots (209).

The notion of post-socialism is not discussed in the postscript, but it is often used throughout the text. I sense that Lu felt obliged to dwell on the concept in more detail in postscript, since it had been a controversial concept and employed in the text without staging a discussion of it. Yet, his understanding of the concept, derived from Dirlik, is comprehensive and critical of mainstream ideas, which miss the dialectics embedded in it, and disregard the its transitional connotation.

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