**Gregory B. Lee, La Chine et le spectre de l'Occident:
contestation poétique, modernité et métissage,
translated from the English by Eliane Utudjian
Saint-André**

Paris, Syllepse, 2002

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Gregory B. Lee, La Chine et le spectre de l'Occident: contestation poétique, modernité et métissage, translated from the English by Eliane Utudjian Saint-André

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

- 1 The sheer number of signifiers in this book's double title shows us straight away that the author of this work is dealing with a very large spectre. To talk of lyrical poetry, its Western reception, contemporary Chinese society and politics, the problems of Chinese immigrants in the West, and the difficulties in the acknowledgment of difference etc., requires a common denominator which affects both substance and form: here it is the concept of hybridity. This term refers us to several possible definitions, among which the following seems to encapsulate the tone and style of this work: "The processes of hybridity, as I conceive them, are meaningful and liberating processes of renewal and change. The establishment of an intersemiotic strategy of hybridity, I believe, allows for progress on the cultural and political planes towards increasingly frequent moments and increasingly important areas of autonomy" (p. 221). This sentence from the work's conclusion allows us to grasp the currents underlying Gregory Lee's theoretical reflections rather more easily than the direction which they take. It also provides an example of the often complex language and tortuous syntax of a work

which demands considerable concentration and intellectual alertness on the reader's part.

- 2 Gregory Lee's work is extremely full and variegated, for it takes as its point of departure an analysis of books and articles by Anglo-Saxon specialists in Chinese literature, following which it addresses the problem of the poetic and political status of popular songs, and then goes on to tackle the question of Chinese immigration into the United States and Britain. This is a wide panorama, and to help us find our way through it we need the guidance of the introduction, which informs us in detail, chapter by chapter, of the steps laid out for us to follow (in addition to which Mr. Lee himself does not hesitate to act as an "escort" at the beginning of each chapter). The major notions which are highlighted and set to work in this study should actually have a whole work each to be fully clarified. They are: the Other (covering the notions of hybridity, racism and purity), modernity, and lyricism. Since there are many possible ways of approaching this work, it is very difficult to give an overall account of it. For this reason I shall choose a single guiding thread, namely the reflections on contemporary Chinese poetry.
- 3 While starting from a semiotic and sociological analytical approach, this work which takes an oblique approach to contemporary Chinese lyric poetry, has a tone rather more akin to Ponge's beloved "expressive rage"; everything is hard-edged criticism and argumentation, and is approached via the "deconstruction" common in contemporary thinking (cf. the chapter heading: "Realist Na(rra)tion, Modernist Shanghai").
- 4 Through its reflections on the Other, this work persuades us that China is forgotten, rejected and despised ("situated as Others, as Third-World writers, Chinese poets and African poets are thrown into the same basket by the Euro-American literary metropolis, and by the new capitalist enterprise which is the book market").
- 5 Furthermore, the Chinese man is not only rejected for being Chinese, as was the case in the early twentieth century in the United States, but especially for being hybrid (cf. the extremely detailed and rousing account in Chapter seven of "the sad condition of the Anglo-Chinese hybrid").
- 6 This rejection, which Gregory Lee examines at length with an insistent and rather commonplace commentary on racism, is also, in the field of Chinese literature, the work of sinologists besotted with ancient China, incapable of recognising contemporary Chinese poetry by poets in exile, and ignorant of their own culture: "Isn't what is really at stake the sinologists' pursuit of domination over Chinese literature, that is over a "sinologised" culture?" (p. 111) The problem is defined in terms of who decides which works, out of contemporary Chinese culture, get translated and recognised in the West.
- 7 The four opening chapters deal mainly with books and articles from Anglo-Saxon universities, which I unfortunately have had little opportunity to consult, but Lee's negative criticism is convincing because the writers' pronouncements are dominated by a barely concealed racism and contempt for contemporary Chinese literature, along with a preference for "the 'official' literary production supported by the one party state" (p. 101).
- 8 A frequent impression produced by the sometimes stifling atmosphere of this book which is so quick to condemn, is that of a feeling of revolt which nevertheless hesitates to state its point of view clearly. Such judgements as "She was both right and wrong"

(p. 47) are not at all uncommon, for the author's ostensible intention is to leave polemics behind by keeping up a moderate tone and giving a balanced account.

- 9 Chapter 2 sets out "to study the relations between modern poetry and ideology from the nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries". This issue of ideological discourse is raised in the context of dissident poetry. Poetry has a political and social role to play, but it is above a social necessity for which capitalist society unfortunately finds a substitute by larding popular songs with their own poetic additives: "In this way poetic needs are largely met, whether in China, Hong Kong, or the advanced capitalist societies, by pop lyrics and non-linguistic practices, or by heavy metal or punk rock songs" (p. 43). While he is critical of commercial music, the author recognises a value in popular music.
- 10 The book is dominated by two poets: Duo Duo, who is said to resemble the "interesting poetess" Tsvetaeva, and Bei Dao "whose name for fifteen years has been most frequently mentioned in connection with the Nobel prize". Among other poets, Mang Ke also has an important place. Some poems are translated and analysed. The analyses draw a parallel between these poets and the work of Benjamin Péret as well as with the "poems" of Charles Trénet, in order to discuss the link between lyricism, ideology and patriotism. Lyrical poetry is considered in two ways. On the one hand there is its use in ideological propaganda as the "bearer of myth and illusion", and on the other, its function consists in "criticising ideology and transcending it". While it is important to emphasise the use of lyricism in political ideology, it is rather tiresome to be told that the latter function "is not without links to the former" (p. 47). Even if Gregory Lee's intended meaning is clear, a coherent definition of lyricism, which is a topic of frequent debates between contemporary poets, would be desirable here, if only to establish essential distinctions between the poetic and the political.
- 11 What then is the relationship between official propaganda poetry and the act of poetic creation?
- 12 The answer appears from Chapter three onwards. When politics occupies the central focus, it sets up two opposing blocks, communist politics and capitalism, which leaves the exiled Chinese poet very little room for manoeuvre. Not wishing to write ideological poetry, while continuing to maintain the need for political writing, he is also constrained to reject the amalgam of liberal democracy and consumerism. Sometimes there is no way out.
- 13 Chapter 4 deals more closely with contemporary Chinese poetry, with particular attention to the exile poets Bei Dao and Duo Duo, as well as Yang Lian. Special emphasis is given to the inner connections between their poetry and Chinese politics. This chapter seems to me an important one, because in France it is very rare to find books dealing with contemporary Chinese poetry. Yet Gregory Lee's bold assertion that the rock singer Cui Jian is a "popular lyrical poet" on a par with the exile poets Bei Dao and Duo Duo, seems doubtful.
- 14 The theme of exile, both of the Chinese poet in another land and of modern man in the society of the spectacle, highlights again the poetry of Duo Duo. Exile is lived as a form of alienation, but it also enables the poet to take a view from outside, which is an aspect of his creativity; this reflection leads up to Alain Touraine's fine observation that "in a unified world, exile is impossible". But such clear exposition seems wanting in the paragraph where Lee writes that "at the popular level, the disaffection and alienation experienced by ordinary people, despite the availability of material goods, which

provides yet another proof of the yawning ideological gap in the post-Mao era, find expression through the spectacular rise of the Falungong sect”.

- 15 The end of the work veers a little away from its reflections on poetry and politics to engage in a much more sociological study of the modern pop song, and its place in relation to mainstream political discourse, in China and France alike. With regard to nationalist feeling and the persistence of racism, particularly against the Chinese in Europe, Chapter seven deals with often overlooked areas of history. The book ends with a chapter which deals with poetry by considering its means of public access, rather than its content, that is the world of cyberspace and its temporary independent sites, which are in favour among separatist cultural tendencies. A notable example in the French context is movement for the defence of Languedoc culture. These later chapters, which are decidedly modernist in orientation and precise in their thematic treatment, contain observations on the characteristics of our consumer society against which lyrical poetry appears as a form of “survival”.