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EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated from the French original by Michael Black

- 1 A Professor of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Judith Farquar has up to now focused mainly on research into medical thinking and practice in contemporary China. Her first publication, in 1987, was entitled *Problems of Knowledge in Contemporary Chinese Medical Discourse*¹, and one of the most recent, *Market Magic: Getting Rich and Getting Personal in Medicine after Mao*².
- 2 *Appetites* follows on in the same area of interest. It is a study, not of Chinese diet or cuisine, nor of the sexual behaviour of the Chinese today, but rather of the ideas some of them have of those things. While the author does not explain the reach of the notion of "objectivising practice", we may understand it to mean the representation one makes of these needs as it appears in advertising, the cinema, the novel and through

various personal experiences. The introduction argues for a globalising, non dualistic anthropology which harks back to Marx³ and Mencius⁴. She emphasises the mark left by history: the research seeks to uncover “a body totally imprinted by history”, in other words to reveal the changes of habitus in the China, described as “postsocialist”, of “reform”, in the author’s own words, “the shift from Maoist asceticism to capitalist boom in the everyday lives and embodied experiences of contemporary Chinese urbanites” (p. 3). A secondary objective is to propose thereby a model of methodological creativity: “an increase in and a blurring of the boundaries between the genres of the source material that can serve as an ethnographic text.”

- 3 The author has known China only since 1982 (cf. note 21, p. 295), a period, she emphasises, when “Maoism” was still much in evidence (cf. pp. 3-14). Nonetheless, the gap between lived experience and idealised history goes some way to explaining the conclusions in the last page of the research: “The jolt that must have accompanied the first glimpse of the new [Lei Feng] posters for those city dwellers was a reminder not only that big capital is taking the place of the state, but that there was a time when the state offered youth, sincerity, and optimism within an altruistic project. With all of its disappointments, this vision promised and for a time delivered healthier bodies, bodies more connected to a coherent collective, bodies that could take pleasure in the ordinary things of a shared life” (p. 291).
- 4 The author does add: “I do not think that Lei Feng's image as offered by the Sanju Corporation would have produced quite such an extreme response in Beijingers in the summer of 2000. But it, too, hailed a remembered, embodied, and therefore far from lost self. There are contemporary Chinese thinkers—Lu Wenfu, Mo Yan, Zhang Jie, and Zhou Xiaowen have been heard from in these pages—who wonder whether the reform era can offer any substitute for the simple but undeniable pleasures of socialism...”.
- 5 While the author, like any self-respecting anthropologist, feels bound by the necessity to become aware of her prejudices as a North American and to seek to sympathise with the object of her study, can these pleasures be reconciled with the picture of two decades of “revolution” (and I for one still find the word appropriate...) on pages 11 and 12, even in a slightly softened version (“After several bad droughts and little alteration in the intensification policy, much of the country experienced a disastrous famine. Many died of starvation or associated illnesses, and only a small proportion of the population, mostly highly placed urbanites, escaped periods of great deprivation”) ?
- 6 In short, the author does not seem to have always been aware of the direction of the irony of the authors she analyses. Is it aimed at the near-contemporary period of reform or at the recent past of Maoist fundamentalism? One is left wondering about possible misunderstandings on this point. The research remains, in its detail, full of interesting touches and provocative thoughts. It is divided into three parts, the first of which is devoted to eating. Its three chapters have *ben trovato* titles which are self-explanatory: Medicinal Meals, A Feast for the Mind and Excess and Deficiency. In the first, which invokes Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Raw and The Cooked*, the author shares both her knowledge of Chinese dietetic discourse and her lived experiences in that area, such as the restaurant which is patronised on the first floor by men only and is always full, for reasons one can guess, or the case of the housewife convinced that asparagus was good for what ailed her, sending for tins of them at great expense and making her whole family eat them every day. The next chapter takes its title from an ironic expression used in Gu Hua’s (1942-) novel *Hibiscus* (1981). The analysis follows

that of *The Whitehaired Girl* by He Jizhi and others in various versions from the 1940s onwards. That of *The Gourmet* (1983) by Lu Wenfu leads to the subject of the third chapter, headed by a quotation from Jacques Derrida which calls into question the art of “eating well”. Then Mo Yan (1956-), with *The Sorgho Clan* and especially with *The Alcohol Country* (1993), is most often put in the hot seat on the question of the contrast between depletion and repletion, between famine and plenty. The medical aspect of the antinomy is presented in an enlightening graphic (p. 139). The discussion leads up to the passion for banqueting which incurs costs to communities which were estimated at US\$12 billion in 1995 (cf. p. 146). The author, quoting Zhang Yimou’s film *Life* (p. 127), has not failed to notice that in these more recent works the irony has turned to sarcasm.

- 7 The second part, devoted to sexual desire (Desiring: An Ethic of Embodiment) opens with a preamble devoted to the analysis of a short story by Ding Ling (1904-1986), written in about 1966, but published in 1978, *Du Wanxiang*, a model girl, the counterpart of Lei Feng, and possessed by an ardour which the author describes thus: “This is a world that imagines love and sexuality together in a general and diffuse eroticism oriented first toward the collective” (p. 170). For the three chapters which divide up this material, it is enough to recall half of the titles: *Writing the Self*, *Sexual Science* and *Ars Erotica*. The first chapter, subtitled *The Romance of the Personal*, rests primarily on the short story by Zhang Jie *Don’t Forget Love* (1937) which created a stir when it was published in 1980, rather than on his better-known novel from 1981 *Wings of Lead*, which, it was said, flew to the assistance of Deng Xiaoping. The following chapter focuses on the appearance and development of a *Scientia Sexualis* which claims to have its roots in modernity and relative sexual freedom. The chapter sheds a critical light on the still little-known field of nascent Chinese sexology. There is a subtle analysis of the discourse of the growing numbers of these publications, and a pertinent exposure of the limitations of surveys of sexual behaviours. Too many “fuzzy spots” make it impossible to try to establish any Chinese specificity. The last chapter refers almost entirely to the old sexual hygiene manuals, rediscovered in Japan in the first half of the last century. To this are added the discoveries of *Mawangdui*, which take the tradition back half a millennium, and are a pretext for national pride and also, thanks to this confirmation of Chinese leadership, for the rehabilitation of a domain that was once taboo. Is it the obsession with impotence which is linked with capitalism or is it rather its advertising in a liberalised economy (cf. p. 269)? There is no doubt that it has recently become a widespread subject. On that question the author analyses Zhou Xiaowen’s film *Ermo*, a comedy from 1994. A certain kind of feminism may feel overcome with nostalgia for an asexual world, and be repelled by these old manuals which have been accused of being imbued with a kind of male vampirism. “I myself do not wish to mine these materials for particular techniques that would add variety to my own or my readers’ sexual habits. This is partly because the most obvious form of sexual embodiment encouraged by these texts is quite markedly male...” (p. 249) the author confides. “Needham insisted that they were not [exploitative of women] because of the ample evidence of sensitivity to women’s sexual needs” (p. 281), she adds further on, with diverse warnings, and concludes: “The woman of this natural, common sense sexual ethic has not enough distinct presence to put her own preferences on the twenty-first-century agenda”.
- 8 These quotations show that, far from keeping a distance of observation deemed to be scientific, the ethnologist becomes involved with the material she is examining. One is

left with a feeling of a sometimes unmethodical impressionism, whose richness, however, cannot be fully expressed without falling into tedious long windedness. The bibliography is revealing (pp. 323-336): no publication prior to 1950. These are questions whose historical roots go much deeper than the establishment of the new regime. The policy of the clean sweep at certain periods need to be re-evaluated, at the very least. Has the measure been taken of what went to ground without allowing itself to be buried? The index deals with the major questions rather than the *realia*, which is a pity: for example there is nothing on dogmeat, which appears as a subject in several places (in particular the parody made of it by Mo Yan on p. 132), or on the heart (p. 142, the classic Chinese medical maxim: "Too much joy harms the heart").

- 9 In short, a book to reread in order to find the pearls hidden in an overabundance of material.

NOTES

1. *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 24, No. 12, pp. 1013-1021.
2. *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 239-57.
3. Cf. p. 7: "Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men in their actual life-process", cf *The German Ideology*.
4. Cf. p. 1: *Appetite for food and sex is nature*.