Staging Local History between Empires: Shandong Boxer Resistance as Maoqiang Opera

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Introduction

In his book *English Lessons*, James Hevia analyses a photograph recording the execution of several Boxer “rebels” near Beijing in 1900. He observes that, at this time, these pictures were distributed freely in public libraries and were meant primarily (and ironically) to educate British audiences about the civilizing nature of their nation’s imperialism. However, at the same time Hevia notices an advertisement of English lessons at a language school pinned on a pillar of the execution ground, thus effectively entangling the violence of military action with foreign language acquisition.¹ Mo Yan’s novel *Tanxiang xing* (Sandalwood Death, 2001) (*TXX*) revisits and commemorates the epochal Boxer Uprising in a response to these pedagogical ideas from the grass roots: a mournful local operatic performance. The narrative reenacts a local conflict in Gaomi County in the wake of events whose escalation yielded several armed interventions between 1898 and 1900. The disruptive effects were brought about by antagonistic forces whose agents were driven by faith in mutually irreconcilable, stereotypical cultural presuppositions for a modernizing China. In this conflict, the resilience of local communities against technological progress was spurred by the foreign ideology’s disregard for ritual propriety as well as by indigenous cultural patterns of identity that, in the light of the historical developments, were rapidly losing their validity. The staged clash between different modes of governance and self-fashioning does not break with the established historiographic emplotments of this chain of events as a ‘season of anomy’ (W. Soyinka), but undertakes to compensate the vanishing dimension of subjective eyewitness accounts with fictional narratives. Moreover, it challenges the ingrained dichotomy between foreign, modern imperial rationality and premodern, local irrational behaviour and thought. The novel’s employment of multiple strategies of historical representation suggests an analysis in the framework of contemporary anthropographic fieldwork theories. By problematizing the anthropographer’s role as a storyteller whose stories are not (completely) his own, anthropography asks questions about the possibility of telling the truth by mea-

suring the spatiotemporal as well as the cognitive distances between the witnessed event, the testifying witness and the external interpreter of the collected stories (V. Daniel). Thus, the inquiry does not focus on the historical events as facts, but rather on their cultural afterlife as (founding) narratives.

Consequently, **TXX** explores a local structure of feeling from the point of view of oral transmissions that, one hundred years after the events, appear gradually to be receding into oblivion. Taking into account that theatres were traditionally major providers of the cultural space for enactments of the human self as a subject of history, **TXX** is itself a theatre of reclamation. It stages a variety of local performances, such as Maoqiang opera, military and religious parades, executions, and battle scenes. A project of the recuperation, or aesthetic reproduction of local knowledge, the novel has much in common with C. Achebe's reflections on the reclamation of their own stories by the world's peoples. Seen in this light, Mo Yan's descriptions of excessive violence appear as strategic in his pursuit of a cultural reclamation of local subjectivities. In times of a growing gap between the modernist vision of progressive human liberation and the real conditions of systemic insecurity, delegitimation and dispossession, this tale of early modern social disorder has as much to say about the world's peoples around 2000, as about the microcosm of Gaomi County in the province of Shandong around 1900.

**History, Theory, and Theatre**

The last time around W.E.B. Du Bois had held high hopes for the twentieth century on the matter of race. Mindful of that, alas, unfinished business, my hope for the twenty-first is that it will see the first fruits of the balance of stories among the world's peoples. (Chinua Achebe)

In China, academic historiography as well as a flood of historical novels and films since the late 1980s, and especially popular TV series like *Towards the Republic* (*zou xiang gonghe, 2003*),² are at present engaged in a large-scale project to rewrite national history and thereby rework the nation's structure of feeling in an attempt to reconcile the various, contesting epochal trends within a new master narrative. At the same time, experimental novelists carry on with their post-Maoist pursuits of decentered, local histories and historiographic polyphony.³ Today, neither the nationalistic melodramatic encodings of the 1930s, nor

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² See Spakowski 2009.