

# REVIEWS

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Liang Luo. *The Avant-Garde and the Popular in Modern China: Tian Han and the Intersection of Performance and Politics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0-472-07217-0 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-05217-2 (paper), ISBN 978-0-472-12034-5 (e-book) . 367 pp.

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Without knowing it, Sinology in the United States is in a profound crisis. It reproduces prejudices and has become an ideology. That is especially true of the confrontation with modern and contemporary China. The enemy of American Sinology is Europe; a hard look at itself is not happening. Given all that, it is amazing that a work like the one reviewed here can appear in the United States.

First of all, it is strange for a European that everybody and his brother are thanked for their help in the production of this study of the theatrical author Tian Han (田汉, 1898-1968). Beyond that, one can only complain about the often-incorrect transcription. But Chinese understand nothing about the phonetics of their native language. So let's just forget about that.

One can be grateful toward the author, who teaches at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, that she has the uncensored courage to place herself in a personal relationship to her object of study and to ask questions of her identity in a new world, the United States, and in a new language, English. It is well known that Sinology vehemently rejects scholarship in the confessional mode. Many Sinologists could just as well have herded cows instead of producing studies on China.

The author has much to say that is new. She sees the avant-garde, the political, and the popular in the case of China as well as of Europe as a single thing. Her goal is to rehabilitate the avant-garde, which is often equated with fascism. She succeeds in doing so effortlessly from the Chinese side, where avant-garde literature was often close to socialism and to the people who were to be enlightened or educated. The author comes to the conclusion that art and ideology, art and propaganda, avant-garde and popular culture are not mutually exclusive.

In this sense, she sees in Tian Han—many of whose plays are translated and published at the University of Bonn—a paradoxical figure, at once a bohemian, a populist, and a politician. As in modern Chinese literature, his subjects are women, children, and the people. All three come together under the aspect of the marginalized, the exploited, and those without a voice.

The author has a good eye for modernity and Christianity. Tokyo revealed itself to the eighteen-year-old Tian Han in 1916 as a world of cinemas, streetcars, and “Western” theater and architecture. Here, in 1920, he produced his first play, *Spiritual Light* (*Lingguang*, 灵光). In it, Christianity, Romanticism, feminism, and socialism come together. That might be surprising, but the author dares to say what others would rather hush up: The movement of May 4, 1919, is unthinkable without the Gospel. Such was the case for Tian Han as well, who saw the “new Chinese man [human]” going to the people in the sense of Christianity.

What especially distinguishes the author's work is her courage, using Tian Han as an example for

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modernity, in bringing together politics and eroticism, Peking opera and Hollywood, war and art, “pop culture” and the Party. The value of this study lies in its removal of the generally accepted separation of art for art’s sake from social commitment.

Translated from German by Joseph D. O’Neil

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**Author Profile:**

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Wolfgang Kubin is a German poet, essayist, sinologist and translator of literary works. He is the former director of the Institute for Oriental and Asian Studies at the University of Bonn, Germany. Kubin has frequently been a guest professor at universities in China, but also in Madison, Wisconsin, US and in Jerusalem, Israel. His best known work is the translation of short stories and essays by Lu Xun. His *History of Chinese Literature in the 20th Century* (published in German as *Geschichte der chinesischen Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert*) is considered as indispensable and a Classic.

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