

# Book Reviews

*Fire on the Rim: The Cultural Dynamics of East/West Power Politics*

by William H. Thornton

Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002, 217 pp.,

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Reviewed by Stephanie Hemelryk Donald

Typhoon Deguan hit Hong Kong on Tuesday, 2 September 2003. The level 3 tropical storm warning was issued in the morning and the level 8 at 1.30 p.m. By 4 p.m. the city had effectively shut down; shopping centres were still, the traffic was gone, most people were home and safe, waiting for the onslaught. It arrived at 10.30 p.m., a double-eyed storm of great ferocity, but not one with devastating impact in Hong Kong Island or Kowloon. Hong Kong 'did' very well, and the morning newspapers were full of praise for the authorities, especially the education services that had sent children home early. The *South China Morning Post* was somewhat disapproving of young people standing unprotected on the waterfront watching the great wind blow in, but there was, overall, a sense that the city had managed beautifully. The following morning, a small audience watched a film from the south China social realist school of the 1950s, *Typhoon Signal 10* (1959). The film deals with the poverty of Hong Kong migrants and a typhoon, that wrecks a shanty-town and orphans two children. A cutaway from the panic to a luxurious jazz club in the city shows people dancing, oblivious to the suffering outside. The film pursues these juxtapositions and thus portrays the social downside of development. The hero, Lee Shin (played by the great Cantonese socialist actor, Ng Cho-fan), is a construction worker dying of a severe stomach ulcer, while the young heroine pays off the community's debts to money-lenders by working as a dance hostess in the jazz club. It is a classic tale of exploitation on the fringe of society. The film is nonetheless upbeat, emphasizing the politicization of poverty as well as the despair. In 1962 an actual typhoon (Wanda) killed over 100 shanty-town dwellers in the Western districts.

There is still poverty and under-employment in postcolonial Hong Kong, and there are plenty of new migrants, predominantly women from the Philippines, but one needs to look to the Mainland for the contemporary parallels to *Signal 10*. Typhoon Deguan moved north on Tuesday and Wednesday into Guangdong, the province where Hong Kong enterprise employs up to 9 million people. The storm killed 32 people in Shenzhen's Bao'an district, 16 of whom were migrant workers camped in a construction site at the Xitian Industrial Village. The newly erected factory collapsed as soon as the wind struck, the 'cement' crumbled away, and the 'steel' girders collapsed. The developers have fled.

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science, and indeed the post-structuralism of cultural studies. These disciplines, he argues, have tended to focus on Western models of political activity in their approaches to Asian experience; 'selling' the relationship between change and familiar political structures as a 'democratic teleology' (pp. 133 ff.), on the one hand, and, on the other, lamenting the effects of homogenization while lauding the dynamics of hybridity. Where allowance has been made for 'difference', it has been insufficiently characterized at local levels, and has thereby allowed political space for pernicious meta-theories of Asian exceptionalism. He is also dismissive of the optimistic fence-sitting of Giddens's Third Way, which he derides as 'a program for selling out with a clean conscience' (p. 30), and of the benign orientalism of left-wing liberalism, which he sees as an apologetic prop, rather than an alternative, to the dominant ideology of the new world order. The realism of Amartya Sen is used as a counterpoint to these errors of judgement. Sen denies 'any conflict between political freedom and economic performance', and points to an instrumental value in freedom for development. He does not therefore support the developmental authoritarianism that characterizes 'Asian Values' in Singapore or anywhere else in the region. Unfortunately, as the overriding argument of *Fire on the Rim* points out, Sen's very sane arguments for instrumental freedom can be quickly reduced by the proponents of new world capitalism to a demand for an expanded free market without democratic checks and balances.

Given that Thornton's critique of theory is tied to his central claim that the use and abuse of postmodernism have been voided of ethical parameters, it is fair to say that he is kinder to Sen than to the postmodernists (who he disappointingly fails to name). Sen's benevolent and acute realism is reduced by the politics of capital, just as subtle postmodern observations may be undermined by a slippage between description and 'standards of judgement' (p. 181). Postmodernism as a mode of thought offers ways of seeing that aim to capture the materialization of late capital. Those ways of seeing are not necessarily supportive of the practices that create late capitalist conditions of labour and governance, nor indeed of the colonial histories which characterize postmodern experience in Asia. There may well be relativism at large, but it needs to be specifically named and analysed. The example that is given is of Michael Walzer's postmodern turn on viewing footage of the Prague Spring march.

... after pondering a film clip of a 1989 protest march in Prague, Walzer ... recognises the 'thinness' embedded within 'thickness'. Realising that he immediately (albeit incompletely) comprehends the meaning of signs carried by culturally remote demonstrators, Walzer faces the stark limits of his own postmodern relativism. (p. 181)

The point that Thornton makes here is that Walzer recognizes that he feels major aspirations in common with the marchers, and that this makes him a universal party to local politics, even though he is still a cultural outsider. Therefore, Walzer gives the lie to a relativist like Samuel Huntington, who names cultural difference as a reason not to 'get involved' while not identifying the 'inroads of commercial globalisation' (p. 181), as just such an involvement. This argument is fair, although two caveats remain. First, Huntington is hardly an exemplary postmodernist, although he may be an opportunist one. Second, one of the problems for the Tiananmen marchers in the same year was that foreign commentators could *only* feel their common universal aspirations (a particular version of democratic participation), and could not sense the local danger of Maoist-style mass petitioning in a centrally

not to extrapolate across localities. Korea and Taiwan exemplify the possibility of local democratic growth coupled with economic progress, but the strength of that growth lies in a commitment to their own histories.

*Fire on the Rim* is a fascinating book, grounded in a great deal of knowledge as well as insight. Thornton's contribution to a nuanced understanding of Asian development is timely and important. The book cares about its topic, avoids the glamorous pitfalls of meta-theoretical answers to complex questions, and deserves to be read by policy-makers as well as an academic public.

#### Notes

1. *The Standard*, 10 September 2003: B3 (no author cited).
2. *South China Morning Post*, 11 September 2003: 1 (no author cited).

#### Reference

Waddington, R. (2003) 'Testing Days in Cancun', *The Standard* (Hong Kong) 12 September: A12.

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#### *Postmodernism and China*

edited by Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang  
 Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001, 464 pp.,  
 ISBN 0-822-32544-6, pbk

Reviewed by Allen Chun

In a word, this book is ambitious, and, like the age that we already live in, disorienting, if not in search of narratives, resistant to totalizing, and challenging to read. Four hundred and fifty-two pages of dense writing covering different disciplinary fields, geographical areas and authorial perspectives can hardly be read from cover to cover, not to mention in one sitting. To say the least, it is a testament to the complexity of the topic being problematized, and I doubt if this will be the last word on the subject, quite the contrary. It tests our understanding of postmodernism in a society such as China, and the diversity of issues raised here can, by extension, be used to problematize postmodernism even in the West. Its similarity to a previous book on postmodernism and Japan, edited by Harootunian and Miyoshi, and also published by Duke University Press, is superficial. Aside from capturing a burgeoning market for such a theme in the East Asian field, these two books largely stand separately. The editors' introduction indicates why we should view the phenomenon of postmodernism in China primarily within a complex field of discursive negotiations grounded in the particular socio-political experiences of China, rather than by reference to their affinity to other Asian discourses or even their direct diffusion from the West. The continuity or discontinuity of modernity and postmodernity in the Chinese context is one axis of entanglements that must be juxtaposed