

## Carlos Rojas

*Homesickness: Culture, Contagion, and National Transformation in Modern China.*  
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.

According to this new book by Carlos Rojas, “homesickness” is “a condition caused not by longing for home, but rather by an excessive proximity to it” (vii). Rojas regards home as a figurative space of illness so as to examine the sense of alterity and alienation deeply structured in the modern Chinese experience. Through a small selection of works, both literary and cinematic, Rojas traces the powerful metaphor of illness in modern China. For him, sickness is a recurring set of tropes in literary, cinematic, and cultural works in a wide range of Chinese communities around the world. Literary and cultural representations of disease are addressed in detail, along with discussions of immunology, DNA, and genetics. This view of illness as both actual and metaphorical leads to the theoretically most exciting phrases that Rojas employs, such as “the cultural logic of the pharmacon” (141), “thematics of virtual cannibalism” (204), and “necropolitical logic of social marginalization” (220). The book takes inspiration from medical humanities in addressing the potential dynamism and structural transformation in the modern Chinese individual, family, and national identity in the light of interrelationships among culture, politics, and science.

The book is organized chronologically in three main parts, titled “1906: Phagocytes,” “1967: Pharmakons,” and “2006: Phantasms,” comprising a total of eight chapters. The year examined in Part I, 1906, is the year of the birth of Pu Yi 溥儀, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), as well as the year in which *Travels of Lao Can* [*Lao Can you ji* 老殘遊記], by Liu E 劉鶚, was published, *Flowers in a Sinful Sea* [*Niehai hua* 孽海花], by Zeng Pu 曾樸, was completed, and Lu Xun 魯迅 saw slides of Japanese executing Chinese in the Russo-Japanese War. In 1967 the Cultural Revolution began, as did production of King Hu’s 胡金銓 martial arts [*wuxia* 武俠] film *Dragon Gate Inn* [*Longmen kezhan* 龍門客棧]. In 2006, the main portion of the Three Gorges Dam [*Sanxia* 三峽] was completed, and China became the world’s largest emitter of carbon dioxide. The centennial of Pu Yi’s birth was also in 2006, when the books *Dream of Ding Village* [*Dingzhuang meng* 丁莊夢], by Yan Lianke 閻連科, and *Brothers* [*Xiongdi* 兄弟], by Yu Hua 余華, were published and the film *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* [*Hei yanquan* 黑眼圈], by Tsai Ming-liang 蔡明亮, was released.

Rojas’s Introduction lays out his methodology and presents his main argument, using the historical image of China as the “sick man of Asia [*Yazhou bingfu* 亞洲病夫],” a term adopted by intellectuals and reformers in China

around 1895. Rojas puts a new spin on this hackneyed phrase, however. He reviews the historical introduction of biomedical paradigms into China and juxtaposes it with medical metaphors employed by Yan Fu 嚴復, Liang Qichao 梁啟超, and Lu Xun.

Part I focuses on Liu E, Zeng Pu, and Lu Xun. Using the biomedical term “phagocytosis” from the Russian scientist Élie Metchnikoff’s discovery of the ability of the body’s white blood cells to recognize and misrecognize pathogens, Rojas finds analogies between this immunological phenomenon and the Chinese Boxers, literary characters such as Lao Can 老殘, Sai Jinhua 賽金花, and the Madman [Kuangren 狂人], in works by Liu E, Zeng Pu, and Lu Xun, respectively. Liu E, who was a practicing physician, makes an itinerant doctor the protagonist of his 1906 novel, in which government and flood control are presented in terms of the protagonist’s views on traditional Chinese medicine. At the beginning of Zeng Pu’s *Flowers in a Sinful Sea*, the Island of Happy Slavery allegory “invokes the Sick Man of Asia as a figure not of China itself but rather of the process by which the nation’s condition may come to be recognized and narrated” (67). Rojas regards the significance of Sai’s return to China and her intervention during the Boxer Uprising in terms of the structural exchange and circulation of women as figurative commodities within a generalized exogamic regime. In two other novels published in 1906—*Stones in the Sea* [Qinhai shi 禽海石], by Fu Lin 符霖, and *Sea of Regret* [Hen hai 恨海], by Wu Jianren 吳趸人—Rojas again finds a symbolic meaning for conflicts and uncertainties in the illnesses of the characters.

Lu Xun’s transformative personal experience of watching the slides in Japan depicting executions is an example of how Rojas thinks about the “modern.” Rather than repeating the usual description of Lu Xun and his “Diary of a Madman [Kuangren riji 狂人日記]” as a progressive political allegory, Rojas proposes a “psychoimmunological hermeneutics” (99) that draws upon the combination of modern germ theory and the birth of psychoanalysis at the turn of the twentieth century. Rojas uses Jacques Lacan’s mirror-stage model in subject formation, which means that at a stage of infancy an external representation of the body through a mirror or mirror-like medium affects the infant’s conceptualization of the self, or “I,” to talk about themes of “mediated recognition, corporeal fragmentation, and representational violence” (101). For Rojas, the major difference between Lu Xun’s experience and Lacan’s mirror-stage is the former’s “logic of disidentification” (102): “Lu Xun, by his own account, begins to come to terms with his identity and positionality precisely through an attempt to work through the result of his inability to identify with the subject position and the perspectival position that the execution slide offers him” (102). For Rojas, one sees an anticipation of

“the internal struggles and alienated disavowals that so famously characterize Lu Xun’s subsequent literary and political endeavors” (103). Rojas discusses in great detail the similarities between Metchnikoff’s recollection of discovering phagocytosis and Lu Xun’s account of viewing the slides—both “figuratively consuming the alien and alienating dimension . . . , transforming it into an imaginary ground for . . . new self-conception” (105).

Part II could have been more comprehensive if Rojas had taken into consideration recent scholarship on socialist literature and culture during the period 1949–1966 and the ongoing historical and theoretical obsession with China’s Cultural Revolution.<sup>1</sup> It is surprising that Rojas devotes only 25 pages of his 300-page book to this period and that he treats Mao Zedong’s initiation of the Cultural Revolution as a sign of a power struggle within the high-level leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. For Rojas, the Red Guards are comparable to white blood cells in immunology “that begin attacking healthy tissue, [which] quickly became a destructive force in their own right” (124) and “the violence unleashed by the Cultural Revolution simultaneously dramatized the ideological pollution the nation had suffered over the preceding seventeen years” (124). Rojas finds a Chinese medicine equivalent in martial arts films, which are identified as poison [du 毒]. Both [xia 俠] and du “represent a node of instability that may drive (or undermine) the possibility of a revolutionary transformation” (131). It is in this spirit that Rojas treats King Hu’s film “as an apolitical distraction or as a productive catalyst for a reimagination of existing sociopolitical regimes” (131). This is where Rojas comes up with the most intriguing theoretical phrases in the book: “cultural logic of the pharmakon” as “a mode of engagement based on a mobilization of elements with mutually opposed qualities” (141). This easily reminds of post-structuralist Jacques Derrida’s “Plato’s Pharmacy,”<sup>2</sup> and his etymological examination of “Pharmakon” in ancient Greek philosophy as a both poison and antidote through writing. It arouses readers’ expectation of how this Derridean concept could relate to modern social and cultural transformations in China.

1 For a great discussion of this period, see Cai Xiang, *Revolution and Its Narratives: China’s Socialist Literary and Cultural Imaginaries, 1949–1966* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); for one of the most recent discussions on the Cultural Revolution, see Wu Yiching, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). The original version of Cai Xiang’s 蔡翔 book, *Geming/xushu: Zhongguo shehui zhuyi wenxue-wenhua xiangxiang* 革命 / 叙述：中國社會主義文學—文化想象 (1949–1966), was published in 2010.

2 See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61–172.

Part III takes up the works of Yan Lianke, Yu Hua, and Tsai Ming-liang as well as less well-known authors, such as Hu Fayun 胡發雲 and Samson Chiu Leong Chun 趙良駿, as part of discussions about SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), HIV/AIDS, and queer sociality. The titles of the four chapters in this section—"Information," "Capital," "Labor," and "Membranes"—are intriguing.

The chapter on "Information" is devoted to a 2006 electronic novel, *ruyan@SARS.com*, by Hu Fayun, and the 2003 film *Golden Chicken 2* [*Jin ji* 金雞 2], by the Hong Kong-based director Samson Chiu Leong Chun. Rojas examines the way in which information and the 2003 SARS epidemic overlap. The suppression of information about the epidemic exacerbated the spread of the virus. Rojas coins the phrase "digital panopticon" (177) in his discussion of the Golden Shield Project [*Jindun gongchang* 金盾工程] implemented by the Ministry of Public Security.

The chapter on "Capital" examines the blood-selling business and its role in the AIDS epidemic in China through readings of Yan Lianke (*Dream of Ding Village*, 2006; *Lenin's Kisses* [*Shou huo* 受活], 2004; *Time's Passage* [*Riguang liunian* 日光流年], 1998; *The Four Books* [*Si shu* 四書], 2010), Yu Hua (*Chronicles of a Blood Merchant* [*Xu san guanmai xueji* 許三觀賣血記], 1995), and Zhou Xiaowen 周曉文 (*Ermo* 二嫖, 1994). The commodification of blood in rural China has led to the dissolution of traditional sociality and underlies networks of capital and labor. In Yan's novel, Rojas argues, blood becomes "a figure of internal alterity" as well as "a vehicle of contagion" (187). Rojas observes in Yu and Zhou's works that self-commodification and consumption enabled by this business could lead to what he calls "a form of cannibalism or autophagy" (203). These themes of "virtual cannibalism" (204), "process of abject self-commodification" (208), and "necropolitical logic of social marginalization" (220) are also discernible in Yan's novels, as a reflection of the sociopolitical environment during China's transition from socialism to capitalism.

The chapter "Labor" bases its discussion on what Rojas sees as a part of a larger Chinese community, centering on works by the Taiwan-based Malaysian director Tsai Ming-liang. Rojas argues that, in Tsai's films (*The River* [*Helio* 河流], 1996; *The Hole* [*Dong* 洞], 1998; *The Wayward Cloud* [*Tianbian yi duo yun* 天邊一朵雲], 2005; *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, 2006), the displaced laborers demonstrate "a dialectics of desire and alienation," which enables a "polymorphously perverse array of desires and libidinal attachments," and this can be taken as "an interrogation of the familial relationships" (229).

Finally, the chapter on "Membranes" focuses on the "thematization of symbolic barriers" (260), specified in the corporeal membrane the hymen in Yu Hua's 2006 novel *Brothers*. For Rojas, the hymen in Yu's novel "represents a space of homesickness" (260). Because of its marginal position in the body

proper, “the hymen is imagined as both helping guarantee the symbolic integrity of the body and its corresponding family structures, while at the same time offering a reminder of the processes of contamination and fragmentation on which the body’s imagined coherence is itself predicated” (260). In his examination of another novel by Yu Hua, *The Seventh Day* [*Di qi tian* 第七天] (2013), Rojas again finds an intriguing critical “space of radical alterity and self-alienation,” which he regards as “the possibility of imagining new forms of belonging” (275).

*Homesickness* is ambitious in its choice of a wide range of subjects for discussion, as well as in its claim to be a reassessment of “the interrelationship between a set of scientific and political concerns” (“Preface,” x). The historical period it addresses is rather long, from the early twentieth century to the early twentieth-first century, so it is not reasonable to expect the author to do justice to such ambitious claims. In the book, notions concerning wounds, sensations, bodily diseases produced through colonialism, revolution, and flows of information and capital are used to address the corporeal and affective dimension of communities. This parallel between the individual human body textualized either in literary or cinematic media, on one hand, and larger sociopolitical communities, on the other, explains the book’s investment in areas of knowledge such as immunology, viruses, and DNA at the very beginning and very end of the book. However, it might still be many steps away from what he claims is a paradigm shift of medical humanities scholarship in Anglo-American Chinese studies. Rojas does a close reading of all the texts he chooses, employing a methodology that is conventional and useful. In the end, however, one cannot help but regret the unfortunate lack of institutional, historical, and social analysis in a book that makes claims about the “national transformation in modern China.”

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