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Larissa N. Heinrich, The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body between China and the West

David Luesink



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David Luesink

- 1 Larissa N. Heinrich, *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body between China and the West*, Taipei, Tianxia wenhua, 2009, 600 pp.
- 2 How exactly did China become known as the Sick Man of Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century? If China's pathological condition has hitherto been posed merely as a metaphor of political weakness following the external incursions of foreign imperialism after 1839 and the internal mid-century rebellions that forced military and political decentralisation, Larissa Heinrich begs to differ. For Heinrich, the association of China and sickness was both concrete and visual. In each of four richly documented and illustrated chapters, Heinrich analyses an image or discrete collection of images to demonstrate how these pictures circulated and re-circulated between China and the West, acquiring multiple and increasingly negative connotations about the health of Chinese bodies and their supposed "lack." And so an image originally meant to demonstrate Chinese methods to prevent smallpox became, upon several circulations, "proof" that China was the origin of the dread disease (Ch.1). Before-and-after portraits of exceptional Chinese surgical patients with massive tumours, commissioned by medical missionary Peter Parker to win patients' trust and donors' cash, became images demonstrating a diagnosis and cure for Chinese cultural pathology (Ch. 2). The dawn of the age of medical photography arrived with social Darwinian connotations of race and disease. Consequently, the semi-pornographic photographs of before-and-after patients reinforced the idiom of Chinese somatic pathology and reified it as a dyadic discourse of racial difference and its medical solution (Ch. 3). Inevitably these representations of Chinese physical weakness influenced Chinese who, in turn, employed them in their own diagnoses of Chinese cultural pathology—most notable in the work of China's most prominent twentieth-century writer, Lu Xun (Ch. 4). Heinrich's account is a powerful argument for highlighting visual sources in our critical genealogies. The core content

and arguments of chapters one through three are available in Heinrich's earlier publications, so I will focus the rest of my comments on what for me is a core component of the book, Chapter 4, "What's Hard for the Eye to See': Anatomical Aesthetics from Benjamin Hobson to Lu Xun." In fact, one way of reading Heinrich's book is to situate the birth of Chinese modernity as the penetration of Chinese metaphysics by a foreign, "realist" aesthetic of the body. Such a reading would see Lam Qua's paintings and their photographic successors as merely a prologue to the introduction and acceptance of a clinico-anatomical view of the body; the before-and-after images a concrete demonstration to the medical missionary's potential patients that the knife-work of the surgeon was, ironically, the "means of becoming whole" (p. 65). For Heinrich, the circulation of radically novel images describing the human body rent asunder the Chinese cosmology of the body. In each of her two examples, the realist form of the image was as challenging as its anatomical content. The epistemological rupture began with Benjamin Hobson's publication of *A New Treatise on Anatomy* [Quanti xinlun] in 1851, which, although at first largely rejected, maintained circulation in various permutations from China to Japan until some 50 years later when Zhou Shuren, a young student at the Jiangnan Naval Academy in Nanjing, saw woodblock editions of it before studying anatomy in Japan. Zhou later took the pen-name Lu Xun and published a large corpus of short stories, novellas, and essays in the 1920s and 1930s that adopted dissection as a metaphor. In *Wild Grass*, Lu Xun creates a scene of anatomically realistic murder: "Just one stab of a sharp knife through this thin, peach-colored skin and the hot red blood will spurt out like an arrow..." (p.139). If Hobson's anatomy text had begun to displace Chinese images of the body that had charted the conceptual relationships between body parts with anatomical representations based on first-hand observation, then Lu Xun's "aesthetic of anatomical realism" displaced vague and allusive Chinese poetry. Somehow, Heinrich argues, in this 70-year period, a new Chinese vision of reality was born, "a massive reorganization of knowledge and social practices," (p.147, quoting J. Crary) which can be short-handed as Chinese modernity. This book is exemplary for doing what very few works of scholarship on Chinese history have done—privileging visual sources over textual ones. It also has many useful discussions of translation issues, carrying forward Lydia Liu's work in that field. Having read two of the chapters in previous incarnations, I think Heinrich's arguments are more powerful in conjunction with each other in this short, readable, and attractive book. However, I do have some quibbles, which are primarily the nitpicking of a historian. The first is the gap between Heinrich's evocation of extremely fertile historical problems and her achievement in delivering an empirically satisfying explanation. In the introduction to the Hobson/Lu Xun chapter, for example, Heinrich argues that "not only the content but the form of dissection-based anatomy as it was introduced to China by Western medical missionaries (...) had a profound impact (...) in the late Qing period and beyond" (p.116). I am fully sympathetic to this argument, but the chapter succeeds more in providing an "outline" for the early history of anatomy (p.116) than in demonstrating its "profound impact." Beyond the commendable attention to visual sources and the (somewhat tenuous) connection between Hobson's text and Lu Xun's early education, Heinrich does not search very deeply beyond the secondary literature for evidence of this relationship. There are also times where I would have preferred deeper analysis rather than open-ended questions (p.105, p.111). Finally, in my copy of Hobson's 1851 text (a 1967 reprint by Yiwen in Taipei), I discern two completely different styles of anatomical

drawing. One set, which includes all of the images Heinrich discusses, are rendered in a professional realist mode comparable to H.V. Carter's in the almost contemporary Gray's Anatomy (1858), but a second set of drawings seem like a child's sketching, rendering fetuses and skeletons in a remarkably unrealistic manner. It is likely a matter of different editions of a book that had many (p.120, p.136), but it would have strengthened Heinrich's argument to explore the various versions, since so much of the argument rests on the interpretation of circulating images. Yet overall, the effect of the book is remarkable, and *The Afterlife of Images* achieves its larger goals of pushing analysis of images to the forefront of the historical agenda, challenging us to look beyond written sources for the origins of the discourse of China's pathology.