

SO, RICHARD JEAN. *Transpacific Community: America, China, and the Rise and Fall of a Cultural Network*. New York: Columbia UP, 2016. Pp. 260.

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*Transpacific Community: America, China, and the Rise and Fall of a Cultural Network* tells the compelling story of a pre-Cold War cultural scene in which a group of American and Chinese writers and artists, fueled by mutual fascination with each other's political and aesthetic insights, collaborated on and circulated projects on both sides of the Pacific. The book is meticulously researched and written with keenly observed details about this short-lived cultural network. Forged through bonds of friendship, admiration, and political affinity, this "transpacific community" did not survive the Cold War when the rigid ideological division between the two nations effectively severed avenues for further relations during the ensuing three decades. Author Richard Jean So is concerned not only with recovering this relatively overlooked piece of cultural history, but also with its relevance as "a lesson for the present" (217). The book demonstrates an analytical approach that views creative collaboration as a "coeval" process that mediates conflictual political investments and cultural differences. It also contends that literary histories of the twentieth century must be understood as "histories of media" (xxv). Paying particular attention to the effects of emerging communication technology, the book shows how the period's "new media," which include the telegram, gramophone, and radio, inspired aesthetic possibilities, facilitated political and philosophical dialogues, and expanded avenues for the transnational circulation of creative works.

The book consists of five interconnected case studies, each focused on a protagonist who was active in the cultural network. Chapter One reassesses writer Agnes Smedley's significance in the history of the American Cultural Front through a study of her role in the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)'s campaign to free Chinese writer Ding Ling from imprisonment during the 1930s. The chapter docu-

ments Smedley's budding internationalist leaning, already nascent in her early work *Daughter of Earth*, which took her to Moscow, Berlin, and eventually Shanghai, where she became deeply involved with prominent Chinese leftist writers including Lu Xun, Hu Feng, and Ding Ling. Ding Ling's arrest in 1932, during a period of brutal "White Terror" when the Nationalist government (KMT) routinely censored, kidnapped, and executed leftist writers, motivated Smedley to push for the ACLU's involvement. The chapter shows how the telegram, an emerging form of media at the time, facilitated not only an effective transnational campaign to free Ding Ling, but also a lively debate between members of the ACLU and leftist Chinese writers over notions of "rights" and "democracy." Furthermore, the chapter shows how an aesthetic style most suited for transmission through the telegram, which So dubs "long-distance realism," facilitated the successful transnational circulation of Ding Ling's fiction. Chapter Two examines the work of Pearl Buck, whose novel *The Good Earth* was a literary bestseller both in the US and in China during the 1930s and early 12 1940s. The chapter explores the influence of Buck's childhood in China, her familiarity with Chinese literary classics, and her bilingual ability on the style of her fiction. So characterizes her style as a hybrid blend of realism influenced by both the modern American novel and vernacular Chinese fiction. This hybrid style creates a "shared discursive space" between readers who are familiar with either tradition, allowing issues that are specific to one cultural space to become issues of another during the process of reading. The popularity of Buck's novel amongst literary publics in both the US and China was further aided by a Pacific book trade that made full use of new communication technology to market the book rapidly and simultaneously across distance. Chapter Three recounts African-American musician Paul Robeson's collaboration with Chinese folk musician Liu Liangmo during the 1940s, when they produced a recording of Chinese folk songs performed by Robeson. This chapter makes a thoughtful contribution to recent scholarship on Afro-Asian cultural history and studies of the Black Pacific. Eschewing the more polemical approach commonly favoured in scholarship on the subject, which tends to assume solidarity and ideological affinity between politically radical artists, So describes Robeson's and Liu's collaboration as "a long process of discovery" in which both insights and contradictions were worked through in a sustained and disciplined manner. The chapter analyzes in fascinating detail how Robeson developed his notion of the "human stem" through his interest in the sound of the Chinese language. Robeson's and Liu's painstaking process of translating and transliterating the songs reflects the musicians' vision of a "universal" democratic impulse that manifests itself in non-Western culture's preservation of the pentatonic scale. The chapter also shows how the broadcast medium of the gramophone allowed Robeson's voice to be intimately transmitted across transpacific contexts, producing receptive listening publics for a "Black voice in Chinese" (112-13). Chapter Four explores Chinese intellectual and writer Lin Yutang's admiration for American liberalism, his literary celebrity in the US during the 1940s, and his subsequent experiment with developing a Chinese typewriter. So

analyzes Lin's (ultimately failed) project as an attempt to "reimagine the English language through the Chinese character" (155) and a means to demonstrate that core liberal values are inherent in the Chinese language. While Lin's literary reputation has largely faded in Chinese and American literary scholarship, and his typewriter project is remembered, if at all, as an obscure failed idea, So sees something much more interesting in Lin's work. He identifies Lin's fascination with typography as a prescient echo of contemporary experimental artists such as Xu Bing and Young-Hae Heavy Industries, whose works destabilize cultural categories and linguistic boundaries through media and technology. The last chapter examines writer Lao She's mediating role between leftist and liberal writers in the Chinese Literary Writer's Association during the 1940s and his subsequent visit to the Yaddo artist collective in New York, where he collaborated, amidst considerable tension, with American writer Ida Pruitt on a translation of his fiction. Expounding on Lao She's fascination with the expanding capacity of *xuanchuan* ("communication" or "propaganda") enabled by new broadcast media at the time, the chapter argues that the success of Lao She's fiction in the US and China was due in part to the use of a narrative technique, which So calls "free indirect propaganda," which simultaneously generates both the radical voice of a grassroots protagonist and the liberal voice of a "wise," omniscient narrator. The literary device allows Lao She to harness both the expressive power of literature and its communicative or propagandist function. It allows the same piece of fiction to be both a subjective representation of the oppressed, as it was received in China, and a rational expression of liberalism that the US State Department at the time found appealing. This "double voice," which So argues runs throughout Lao She's work, represents an aesthetic that both resists structures of oppression while at the same time "works generatively with the state and not merely within a coerced or complicit form" (209).

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In a spirit not unlike that of its protagonists, *Transpacific Community* practices a form of analysis that does not regard cultural phenomena as acts of either resistance or accommodation. Instead, the book demonstrates that the complex *process* of creative collaboration and cultural exchange always involves contradictions and ambiguity, and may be resistant in one context of power while accommodating in others. Rather than adjudicating the subversive potential of a work, the book values practices that allow writers and artists to mediate their different ideological propensities, whether liberal or radical, through friendship, curiosity, and mutual interest in each other. As the book recovers a historical moment when the Pacific was an exemplary site of such mediation, at a time when the changing infrastructure of communication technology opened up new pathways of connection, its approach to cultural practices is also vital and relevant to understanding the contemporary moment.

Two thematic strands in the book offer some opportunities for further engagement. First, the fascinating chapter on Robeson is the only chapter that studies a non-literary artist, while all other chapters focus on writers. The book would be more balanced if it also referenced other non-literary artists in the network or at least

included a discussion of the relation between its predominantly literary protagonists and other non-literary artists. Second, the book's exclusive focus on the US-China nexus runs the danger of reifying the US and China as the unquestioned centres of the Pacific, especially in a contemporary context in which these two nations are dominant cultural and economic superpowers. The transpacific sphere is, of course, much larger than the circle around China and the US. It is full of other protagonists whose tracks and traces run through and across these centres of power. As the book so eloquently demonstrates the value of transnational perspectives, and as it so sympathetically attends to writers and artists whose legacies had been obscured or forgotten, it should also compel us to look beyond the US and China, towards the obscured margins and forgotten corners of the transpacific worlds.

Overall, *Transpacific Community* is an impressive work of cultural history and a valuable roadmap for understanding creative practices in our mediatized and globally connected world.