The Chinese Political Novel: Migration of a World Genre. By Catherine Vance Yeh. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015. Pp. xii + 429. $59.95/ £44.95.

Although it was not the first Chinese political novel to appear in the final decade of the Qing dynasty, Liang Qichao's 梁啟超 *Xin Zhongguo weilai ji* 新中國未來記 (The Future Record of New China), published in Liang's own Yokohama journal *Xin xiaoshuo* 新小說 (New Novel) in 1902, was the work that established the genre in China. However much ballyhooed in its early years, the genre *per se* did not survive the decade, while even its initiator, along with most subsequent critics, questioned its general literary validity. As Liang wrote in his original 1902 "Xuyan" 緒言 (Introduction) to his novel:

> The intention behind the creation of this work was purely to express a few trifling political opinions, so as to solicit comments from knowledgeable patriots. . . . When I had completed two or three chapters, I read it again, and while it seemed like a work of fiction, it was not; while it seemed like a collection of tales, it was not; and while it seemed like a treatise, it was not, so I didn't know what sort of genre it was, and as I thought of myself I had to laugh. Although this is the case, since the wish was to express political opinions and discuss national affairs, its form could not but differ somewhat from ordinary fiction. Such things as law, the constitution, speeches, and treatises often appear and when they pile up it becomes utterly boring; knowing that this cannot satisfy the appetites of our readers, I hope that the other types of more interesting writing in our paper will make up for it.
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> 茲編之作，專欲發表區區政見，以就正於愛國達識之君子。……此編今初成兩三回，一覆讀之，似說部非說部，似稗史非稗史，似論著非論著，不知成何種文體，自顧良自失笑。雖然，既欲發表政見，商榷國計，則其體自不能不與尋常說部稍殊。編中往往多載法律、章程、演說、論文等，連篇累牘，毫無趣味，知無以饜讀者之望矣，願以報中他種之有滋味者償之。[1]

Neither have later critics been generous in their evaluations of these novels, with the contemporary critic Wu Runting's 武潤婷 comments being representative of the critical discourse as a whole: "However, we also have noticed with regret that

[1] Chen Pingyuan 陳平原 and Xia Xiaohong 夏曉虹, eds., *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xiaoshuolilun ziliao* 二十世紀中國小說理論資料 (Critical Materials on Theories of the Twentieth-Century Chinese Novel) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1989), pp. 37–38.

although Liang Qichao and those like him perceived the affective power of the aesthetics of the novel, they did not take the further step of considering how the novel is able to move people, and did not perform in-depth examinations of the characteristics of the aesthetics of the novel, but just moved directly to seek to use the novel to propagate the principles of political reform." (然而，我們也遺憾地看到：梁啟超等人看到了小說藝術的感染力，卻沒有進一步思考小說何以會感人，沒有深入探討小說藝術自身的特點，徑直地要求用小說宣傳政治改良的道理。)[2]

It is on to this seemingly unpromising terrain that Catherine Yeh has applied her considerable scholarly talents in *The Chinese Political Novel: Migration of a World Genre*, an ambitious attempt to redeem the importance of the genre both as a world-wide phenomenon and as a key part of the evolution of the modern Chinese novel. The work is divided into two principal sections, the first, "The Formation of a World Genre: The Political Novel" devoted to an outline of the growth of the political novel in Europe and its subsequent migration to East Asia, with the second, "Bringing the World Home: The Political Novel in China," dedicated to describing how the form took shape in late Qing China. From the initial section, the first chapter, "Forming the Core" begins with Disraeli's seminal political novel of the early 1840s, *Coningsby*, moves on to Ruffini's work in Italian, thence to America with Henry Adams and Edward Bellamy's 1888 *Looking Backward*, ending with the first migration to an Asian setting in José Rizal's two 1890s texts of struggle in the Philippines, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. The chapter ends with a very useful attempt to list the characteristics of the form, including its focus on national crisis, its reformist agenda, the symbolic nature of its major characters, and its focus on "ideals and the struggle to make them triumph" (p. 52). The author notes in passing the problems in taxonomizing the form, in that "the political novel has many points in common with the social and historical novel. This overlap complicates definition and differentiation," (p. 49; noted again on p. 97) words she would have done well to keep in mind in writing the later sections of the book, where her dogmatism in categorizing just what does and does not constitute the political novel in China often gets in the way of clear analysis of the texts themselves.

The second chapter, "Global Migration" focuses at first on the move of the form to Japan, with a careful tracing of the filiations between earlier European work and Japanese texts inspired by them. It emerges from this section that the filiation of the Japanese epigone novels to European models was considerably more faithful to their sources than was the case with the Chinese derivatives, which seem to wander pretty

[2] Wu Runting, *Zhongguo jindai xiaoshuo yanbian shi* 中國近代小說演變史 (A History of the Transformation of the Modern Chinese Novel) (Ji'nan: Shandong renmin chubanshe, 2000), p. 388.

far from their supposed models. The chapter moves on to discussion of the migration of the form to China, asserting that in addition to opening new avenues of public discourse, "the introduction of the political novel widened the horizon linking Chinese political reforms with reform movements in other parts of the world," (p. 94) surely something of an overstatement, as Chinese reformers were in general quite able to see counterpart political formations and initiatives in other parts of the world without the intercession of the political novel. The claims for the importance of the form do not stop there, however, as the author goes on to say that the form introduced by Liang Qichao "remained the dominant model for the next decade and encoded many of the new elements of the [political novel] genre. Its narrative broke with the traditional plot-structure of a circle of karmic retribution and replaced it with an evolutionary trajectory. Resetting inherited notions of time and space, it introduced the modern novel into China" (p. 95). The final sentence in particular represents the sort of tunnel vision and overstatement that too often afflicts this book: overlooking, among other sources of the modern novel, Lin Shu's 林紓 important contributions and such things as Wu Jianren's 吳趼人 pioneering use of the first-person narrator in *Ershi nian mudu zhi guai xianzhuang* 二十年目睹之怪現狀 (Strange Events Eyewitnessed in the Past Twenty Years) or the temporal inversion featured in his *Jiu ming qiyuan* 九命奇冤 (The Strange Case of Nine Murders).

The second section of the book—and by far the longer of the two—consists of five chapters and a brief conclusion, the five chapters being chapter three, "The Migration of Literary Forms," chapter four, "'Reform of Governance' and the New Public Sphere," chapter five, "Women and New China," chapter six, "In Search of New Heroes" and a final and extremely illuminating chapter seven, "Beginning of the Beginning: The Wedge Chapter." In this last chapter Professor Yeh convincingly demonstrates that the "Wedge," the introductory passage that guided the reader toward the ultimate meaning of the story in the traditional novel, was adapted in the late Qing to allow the novelist to close off the too-open possibilities of interpretation made possible by the form of the new novel, and push the reader toward the correct political reading of the text. Yeh has in these chapters digested and summarized an impressive number of novels, but as in many literary histories aspiring to be comprehensive, it must be said that the short synopses and brief commentaries following the summaries ultimately become something of a blur: the two or three page plot summaries of so many novels are too short to provide any real insight into the nature and significance of the novels described, particularly the formal, or "literary" features; the accounts end up seeming mostly descriptive. This is a particular hazard when the topic is the political novel, since it is marked by overt messaging of programmatic reform and schematic plotting and characterization, potential flaws that only seem worse when presented in summary form. While the author is at pains at various points

to distinguish the novels she is discussing from political tracts (e.g., on p. 268), in the end the very nature of the short amount of discussion given to any particular novel tends to efface the difference between novel and tract for the reader being introduced to these novels for the first time. An exception to this is the fine discussion of the Chinese translation of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (pp. 284–93), which is quite a bit longer than the other summaries, and in which the characters are analysed and compared among the various editions in different languages, thus vividly highlighting the particular qualities of the Chinese version. In general, however, we travel a bit too close to the ground throughout this second section of Yeh's book, and thus mostly have a difficult time seeing the forest for the trees.

One of the issues that continually comes to mind throughout the discussion of the individual novels is the nature and definition of the "political novel" itself. One of the immediate problems here is that there were all sorts of labels developed to characterize the flood of novels coming onto the literary stage in the first decade of the twentieth century, with considerable overlap among the rubrics used, sometimes with the same novel being labelled differently on different occasions; also, the categories often tell us little about specific content or form, and the "political novel" was no exception to this. The attempt to single out a single line of political novel with specific characteristics is thus perhaps doomed at its outset. Moreover, the fact that many, if not most, of the novels put into the "political" category were labelled as belonging to a different one gives one pause as to the substantiality of the genre itself. We have, for instance, novels labelled by their authors or publishers, as, among many other categories, "historical novels" (歷史小說), "hero novels" (偉人小說), "social novels" (社會小說), "novels of ideals" (理想小說), "allegorical novels" (寓言小說), "constitution novels" (立憲小說) all discussed unproblematically as "political novels" throughout the book. Perhaps the extreme example is *Niehai hua* 孽海花 (Flower in the Sea of Retribution), called a political novel when its first few chapters were published by Jin Songcen 金松岑 in 1903, but relabelled in 1907 as a "historical novel" by Zeng Pu 曾樸, who had taken over its composition, only to be re-christened as a "social novel" in 1928 (p. 339).

In other words, as Liang Qichao's comments cited at the beginning of this review would indicate, fixing generic characteristics or developing self-conscious and autonomous genres in this era of literary flux were not things anybody was much concerned with at the time, and retrospective attempts to do so can never be completely persuasive. In this context, it would be well to keep in mind the words of Chen Pingyuan 陳平原: "Embedded in the creations of the new novel, aside from such truly political novels as *The Future Record of New China*, were big chunks of political theorizing that other genres of the novel liked to mix in; it was as if in not

doing this they could not embody their new style and new atmospherics." (體現在新小說創作中，就是除《新中國未來記》這樣真正的政治小說外，其它各類小說中也都喜歡摻雜大段的政治議論，仿佛不如此就無法體現其新風格、新氣象。)[3]

In corroboration of this, Yeh notes that "Ouyang Jian [歐陽健] has shown that the 39 novels published in 1903 can all be regarded as 'new novels' dealing in various way[s] with the reform agenda" (p. 163), an analysis that would fit any reasonable definition of a political novel. In short, all the "new novels" of the late Qing were political to one degree or another, and mostly quite decidedly so. The real question, then, should perhaps not be attempting to narrow down toward a highly specific definition of the form, but to deal with the issue of the reasons for and the means by which political agendas insinuated themselves into literature as a whole, the beginning of which, while arguably located in the final decade of the Qing, certainly did not end there; C. T. Hsia's famous "obsession with China" is but a later manifestation of the same propensity.

There is the related issue of the literary quality of the works themselves, which Chinese critics of various generations and working in different political and academic dispensations have generally found to be deficient. Yeh pretty much refuses to grasp this nettle, writing at one point that "the marginalization of the political novel in literary scholarship also indicates a disregard for the political and media context in which it developed as well as its markers of modernity" (p. 351). This judgement strikes me as close to absurd, as the one thing that Chinese literary scholars in the past century cannot be accused of is "a disregard for the political and media context." And as Yeh frequently mentions, a substantial percentage of the novels she discusses were never completed, being abandoned in mid-stream by their authors, hardly an argument for the robustness of the genre or for the high quality of the works produced within it.

There is another matter in which the book does not live up to its promise. In spite of many pertinent references to the global scope of the political novel, the overall political context of the times is dealt with rather superficially, the subaltern position of China in the world during those years in particular. We are repeatedly told versions of the idea that "there is a consensus among the authors of political novels that external factors—such as foreign powers—only have an effect because internal factors—lack of modernizing efforts from the state, lack of patriotic and civilizing energies among the people—make this possible" (p. 344). From the perspective of the rhetorical needs of the reform agenda this is certainly true, as a major component

[3] Chen Pingyuan, *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi* 20 世紀中國小說史 (A History of the Twentieth-Century Chinese Novel), Vol. 1, 1897–1916 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1989), p.10.

of the post-1895 mind-set was to convince people that merely turning the foreigners away was not realistic. The larger context of the ineluctable and unjust foreign pressure, however, was always present just behind the scenes and is not something that Yeh much deals with. After all, when the Wedge to the *Lao Can youji* 老殘遊記 (The Travels of Lao Can) takes the contemporary Chinese political order to task, it is also careful to note that one of the reasons for the problems is that the crew of the "ship of state" "are accustomed to sailing on the 'Pacific' Ocean and can only live through 'pacific' days."[4] That is, the incursions of the Western imperial powers are the ultimate cause of the chaos. Even Yan Fu 嚴復 in his first 1895 essay pointing out the urgent need to recognize the sources of Western temporal superiority, includes a screed against the barbarian incursions that had instigated the crisis in the first place:

> When the Westerners first came, bringing with them immoral things that did harm to people [i.e., opium], and took up arms against us, this was not only a source of pain to those of us who were informed, it was then and remains even today a source of shame to the residents of their capital cities. At the time, China, which had enjoyed the protection of a series of sagacious rulers, and with its vast expanse of territory, was enjoying a regime of unprecedented political and cultural prosperity. And when we looked about the world, we thought there were none nobler among the human race than we. Then suddenly one day a group of island barbarians wearing wild clothes, with a bird-like language and animal-like faces, sailed to our shores from thousands of miles away and knocked at our gates requesting access. When they failed to attain their aims, they breached our coastal defences, imprisoned the officials of our land, and even burned the palaces of our emperor. At the time the only reason we did not devour their flesh and sleep upon their hides was that our power was insufficient.
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> 方西人之初來也，持不義害人之物，而與我搆難，此不獨有識所同疾，即彼都人士，亦至今引為大詬者也。且中國蒙累朝列聖之庥，幅員之廣遠，文治之休明，度越前古。遊其宇者，自以謂橫目冒耏之倫，莫我貴也。乃一旦有數萬里外之荒服島夷，鳥言夔面，飄然戾止，叩關求通，所請不得，遂爾突我海疆，虜我官宰，甚而至焚燬宮闕，震驚乘輿。當是之時，所不食其肉而寢其皮者，力不足耳。[5]

[4] Liu T'ieh-yün 劉鐵雲, *The Travels of Lao Ts'an*, trans. Harold Shadick (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 8.

[5] Yan Fu, "Lun shibian zhi ji" 論世變之亟 (On the Urgency of Change in the World), in *Yan Fu ji* 嚴復集 (Collected Works of Yan Fu) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), vol. 1, p. 4.

These pressures of at once having to accommodate the foreign and resist it are perfectly exemplified in chapter six, where Liang Qichao is first quoted as saying "being members of the yellow race, of course we love the heroes from our race more than those from the white race" (p. 272) only to be told on the following page, without any analysis of the contradiction, that in choosing images for his journal, "in the ultimate critique of the Chinese character, these heroes were all Europeans." Such characteristic late Qing tensions are largely elided in *The Chinese Political Novel*.

Similarly, the difficulties and contradictions within the reform agenda itself are not pursued in any depth. For instance, at one point, Yeh seems quite confident that "the literary form of 'looking back from the future' . . . echoes the understanding of an objectively evolutionary process that is realized through conscious participation" (p. 135). In his *Developmental Fairy Tales*, however, Andrew Jones correctly sees "development" as a term "haunted by its own semantic instability, by the gap between its sense as an intransitive and inevitable historical unfolding, and as a descriptor for the transitive and purposive activity of active historical agents, particularly elite intellectuals and the state."[6] Her failure to acknowledge the problems underlying the intellectual structure of the reform agenda perhaps accounts for why Yeh does not even mention Wu Jianren's important and highly entertaining *Xin Shitou ji* 新石頭記 (New Story of the Stone), a novel that would seem to fit most of the criteria for the political novel (reformist, sense of national crisis, symbolic characters, a "looking back from the future"), but that ends up in collapse, imparting the sense that the glorious future was merely a dream after all. Does her sense of the political novel not include those that engage in critical examination of the fragile underpinning of the reform agenda itself? In the end, Yeh's steadfast sticking to the surface of the reform agenda and its literary manifestations renders the book less than adequate in dealing with the full measure of the manifold crises of this most interesting period of modern Chinese history.

It is probably inevitable that a scholar attempting to resurrect what she regards as an unjustly neglected genre will make claims for it that those not persuaded by the quality of the work under analysis will find overstated. For all the problems with her effort to establish the political novel as the predominant genre of its time, however, Catherine Yeh's *The Chinese Political Novel* still has immense amounts to offer, particularly in its delineation of some of the ways in which "world literature" came to China in the late Qing.

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[6] Andrew F. Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 3.