

The Journal of Asian Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/JAS>

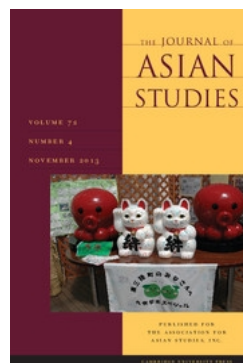
Additional services for *The Journal of Asian Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



***A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture.* By Barbara Mittler. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012. xvi, 486 pp. \ \$59.95 (cloth).**

Denise Y. Ho

The Journal of Asian Studies / Volume 72 / Issue 04 / November 2013, pp 980 - 981

DOI: 10.1017/S0021911813001277, Published online: 28 November 2013

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021911813001277

How to cite this article:

Denise Y. Ho (2013). The Journal of Asian Studies, 72, pp 980-981 doi:10.1017/S0021911813001277

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

than others, and hence bad. Similarly, in the conclusion, Li notes that the narrative form is inherently teleological, since it culminates in endings, but then he seems to argue that one can avoid teleology as long as the master narrative is properly done, with an appreciation for how events appeared at the time and how different outcomes were possible.

If this is a conundrum, part of the answer for Li lies in professionalization, disciplinary standards, and motives, that is, the historian's responsibility to seek the truth rather than to legitimate a political stance. In my view, this cannot completely solve the conundrum, since historians can never be innocent of ideology or unaware of endings. Nonetheless, *Reinventing Modern China* presents a nuanced analysis of history writing in China during the Maoist period and since. In Li's reading, there seems to have been very little imagination or authenticity, at least until the last few years, but a great deal of politicization.

PETER ZARROW

Academia Sinica

zarrow@gate.sinica.edu.tw

A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture. By BARBARA MITTLER. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012. xvi, 486 pp. \$59.95 (cloth). doi:10.1017/S0021911813001277

Barbara Mittler's new book sets out to challenge many of the myths about China's Cultural Revolution (1966–76). The popular and scholarly understandings of the “ten years of turmoil” as “exceptional, unprecedented, and unrepeatabe” (p. 384) are called into question throughout Mittler's study. The central argument of the book is that the Cultural Revolution was but one part of a search for modernity that began in the nineteenth century and continues to the present. Mittler explores this “continuous revolution” by juxtaposing careful readings of cultural products with oral histories, showing that lived cultural experience was diverse and contradictory.

A Continuous Revolution is structured around physical senses, beginning with “smells” and ending with “touch.” Interdisciplinary in its approach, the book's three main parts are “sounds,” “words,” and “images.” Some subsections even echo genre; the chapter on musical revolutions mimetically follows an A-B-A composition (p. 40).

Part I (“sounds”) examines what Mittler calls “MaoMusic,” taking the examples of the model works and Cultural Revolution songs to argue that the Cultural Revolution was a high point in the politicization of music and the attempt to define “New Chinese Music.” As part of this longer revolutionary tradition, Mittler shows that compositions drew on both foreign and traditional music. Through “pentatonic romanticism,” or the adaptation of pentatonic folk melodies to Western instruments, model works such as the *Yellow River Cantata* spread classical music across China (p. 75), and through echoing traditional opera's elements and didacticism, model operas followed Beijing opera's ability to adapt and bridge high art and popular culture (p. 51).

Part II turns to “MaoSpeak,” with the *Three Character Classic* and Mao's use of the story “The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountains” as case studies. Like opera, the *Three Character Classic* also underwent reforms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in the same way the use of its genre to criticize Confucius was part of the May

Fourth challenge to tradition. Mittler points out that in the same way that MaoMusic spread classical music, the Cultural Revolution attacks on Confucius ironically perpetuated and popularized Confucian culture (p. 187). The elevation of Mao Zedong Thought to canon similarly created a ritualized “canonical modern philosophical heritage” (p. 193), but MaoSpeak represents a high point; unlike its treatment during the Yan’an period, Mittler argues, Cultural Revolution MaoSpeak decontextualized fragments of Mao’s writings and created concrete models and heroes to call Mao Zedong Thought into action (p. 227).

Part III uses the image of Mao himself and the genre of the comic book to present MaoArt, arguing that propaganda art was ubiquitous—taking on “the functions of popular religion”—and successful, making a lasting impact on people’s lives (p. 263). Speaking to the continued power of the Mao portrait, Mittler suggests that “Mao becomes a substitute ritual object precisely because he is being reproduced so many times, and art is thus politicized and politics aestheticized in China” (p. 270).

A Continuous Revolution concludes with the example of the comic book as the “most popular of all art forms” (p. 331). Like opera and the *Three Character Classic*, the comic book has its own history as a tool of revolution, and, mirroring MaoMusic and MaoSpeak, it could be simultaneously politically restricted and individually interpreted.

Mittler’s work, intertextual in its readings and intertemporal in its scope, makes a significant contribution to Cultural Revolution studies; she successfully debunks many of the myths of the Cultural Revolution, which should no longer be starting points in our analysis of the period. Further, *A Continuous Revolution* makes three interventions in the field. Firstly, by showing how propaganda appealed, how it built on tradition and on variety, and how it was ritually repeated, the book offers a new way of conceptualizing propaganda and propaganda art (p. 387). Secondly, the book suggests new ways of periodizing both modern Chinese cultural history and the Cultural Revolution itself: the Cultural Revolution should be seen in revolution’s *longue durée*; the Cultural Revolution could itself be extended to 1964–78 (p. 384); and between the 1960s and 1970s there were significant differences, as seen in the transition in MaoArt from oil painting to ink painting (p. 294) or the republication of the *Monkey King* comic in 1972 (p. 353). Thirdly, Mittler’s work calls for a revision of our understandings of modernity by framing Chinese “modern” culture as “hybrid and transcultural” (p. 187) and by placing Cultural Revolution culture at the high point of such modernity.

Despite the depth and breadth of this study, however, many questions remain. While one of the strengths of *A Continuous Revolution* is its juxtaposition of textual analysis with oral histories, Mittler’s interview sample is small and primarily urban and elite. Though from the outset Mittler explains that her oral histories are not “statistically relevant” (p. 5), she still uses a group of forty informants to represent “many people” or “almost everyone” (p. 355). It is difficult to use oral histories to make a claim for diversity and contradiction in experience while at the same time using particular quotations to support an argument; perhaps for this reason the text contains many sentences qualified with phrases like “more or less” or “at least to an extent.” Still harder to make are arguments for the “success” of propaganda art, though a convincing case is made through the afterlives of cultural products and their definition as popular art (pp. 323–24). Nonetheless, Mittler’s work answers many questions and has prompted some new ones, including the suggestion that future research examine underground and alternative cultures (p. 379). Her conclusion that there are “multiple Cultural Revolutions” (p. 378) suggests that the Cultural Revolution still defies categorization.

DENISE Y. HO

The Chinese University of Hong Kong
denise.ho@cuhk.edu.hk