

home – leaving, returning or longing – made visible by Wong’s insightful readings is the best part of the book. A compelling example is in two poems by Bei Dao and Nina Mingya Powles respectively:

I wait in line until the small window
shuts: O the bright moon
I go home – reunions
are one less
fewer than goodbyes (Bei Dao, p. 29)

I was almost born in the lunar month of padded clothing
...
I can almost hold all the meanings of 家 in my mouth
Without swallowing [*home, family, domestic*
a *measure word* for every almost-place I’ve ever been] (Nina Mingya Powles, pp. 118–119)

In her separate analysis of these two poems, Wong makes it clear how the poetics of home is central to the experience of writing in diaspora. Even though home has a uniform appeal to us all and we are bound to it physically and emotionally, the meaning of home is generated by a productive distance from it. For Bei Dao, who is leaving once again, home is a measure of his life on the move without a destination; for Nina Mingya Powles, who longs for a home where she has never been, it is a source of imagination for belonging and possibility.

It is on this theme of home that this book convinces us that the 26 poets are both Chinese and diasporic. It is easy to notice in them the classical echoes of travel, journey and nostalgia of pre-modern Chinese poetry that still address our poetic sentiments about home today. These sentiments can be diasporic in the sense that they mark the absence of home as a signifying force. Indeed, these poets are united in their endeavour to express these sentiments in full while experiencing the home as lack or as dispersal.

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The Otherness of the Everyday: Twelve Conversations from the Chinese Art World During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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The Otherness of the Everyday, edited by Jiang Jiehong, director of the Centre for Chinese Visual Arts at Birmingham City University, is more than the printed version of conversations between artists, curators and art theorists bridging Birmingham and several cities in China. It is a time machine catapulting us back to the beginning of the strange new world of COVID-19 lockdowns. Crucially, it is not the inert armchair of a Eurocentric orientalist that supports our time travel, but the globally informed and China-connected computer screen of a transculturally informed



curator-cum-scholar, who – as a native of Shanghai – found home in the UK. The suddenly grounded frequent flyer decided to go online with a weekly seminar series aptly titled “The World, Two Metres Away” (*Liangmiwai de shijie*): the 12 resultant conversations, which took place between June and September 2020, are translated in this volume. Our time travel thus unfolds in chapters that follow the chronology of the seminars, and collective memory is enhanced with 26 black-and-white photographs of uncannily empty public squares, official posters pronouncing quarantine regulations, and masked people practising social distancing, be it in London, Milan, Paris, Shanghai or Wuhan.

Even readers unfamiliar with academic discourse about the Sinophone world and (contemporary) art will immediately recall the unsettling alienation from an everyday suddenly turned upside down and start to compare their experiences. In this sense, the volume effortlessly realizes its dedication to “immediate reflections from the Chinese art world through critical discussions on present-day experiences” and “future community building and cross-cultural understanding between China and the rest of the world” (xiv). Its strength lies in the fact that the voices we read are not – again – discussing China or Chinese art as the “other” in longstanding, now globalized academic discourses of (cultural) alterity and artistic practices that are informed by post-colonial, transnational or transcultural negotiations of difference. Rather, all participants share the experience of an unexpected “othering” of their daily lives and the amazement of being brought together more closely through a global crisis, while at the same time being forced apart – “two metres” – and mostly stranded in their homes. Read from today’s perspective, the book also recalls the breathtaking way the virus has continued to challenge certainties and fuelled our adaption to screen-shared proximity, even though the book ends when Omicron and China’s later zero-COVID strategy were still unheard of.

Only time will tell the book’s ultimate value for future research. However, precisely the fact that the volume in part reads as if it were an elaborate logbook of Jiang’s ongoing and growingly insightful conversations with long-term and new acquaintances in the field, invites us to critically reflect on our own memories of that period.

Reading how the Hangzhou-based pioneering video artist Zhang Peili, a retired art professor, tried to flee from pandemic restrictions in China by extending his stay in Thailand, but eventually accepted the mandatory stay in the quarantine hotel from where he joined the conversation, is instructive. It shows that artists of his standing belong – to a certain extent – to a cultural and financially independent elite that knows ways of softening the impact of governmental regulations. However, it also shows how this does not ultimately prevent them from having to follow the general rules, resulting in Zhang’s observation about an “essential cultural (and political) difference” between China and Europe that denies Chinese citizens the democratic choices that Europeans have. Building on his pioneering spatial experiments in the 1990s that nudged visitors in the role of (mutually) observant participants, his recent *XL Chamber* (2018) invites audiences to enter a huge container room, the doors of which shut automatically for an unpredictable time, causing mixed “feelings of randomness, unpredictability and dysfunction” (p. 42) in visitors, while controlling their freedom to move out again. Seeing how Zhang engaged with questions of control long before the pandemic, the reader senses the local context and history of state control, which also resonates with Western fears of tightening governmental control in a technologically wired, globalized world. The pandemic has heightened awareness that presumed socio-political differences can easily turn into similarities, given our globally related, late capitalist predicaments.

It is interesting to compare Zhang’s critical stance with that of Li Lin, one of only four women included in these conversations – a definitive bias and shortcoming of the volume. She humbly describes herself only as “the founder of JNBY (*Jiangnan buyi*)” (p. 97), a fashion label that started in 1994, which mixes aesthetic reflections – centring on “rhythm,” reflections on how to re-imagine “tradition,” and a sustained engagement with visual perception of natural things (like leaves bitten by insects or stones of various shapes) – with professional concerns such as a loss of basic technical

and crafts knowledge in the PRC today. She sees this resulting in a new generation of fashion professionals being largely trained abroad (p. 102), where lecturers would be required to have worked for several years in the market before passing on their expertise. Surprisingly, she seems little concerned with the immediate impact of the first lockdown that hampered the launch of JNBY's seasonal collections, but rather notes how the slowing down has given her time to consider the future of the company. Reading how JNBY turns to sustainable clothing and more ecological production attests to a planetary thinking that sees Chinese designers equally and jointly engaged with peers around the world and looking at the pandemic as a healthy break rather than a deadly blow to the creative industry.

A strength of the conversation series lies in bringing together diverging political positions, for instance in the different stances of Pi Li (chapter three), curator of Hong Kong's M+ museum complex and Zhang Zikang (chapter four), director of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) museum in Beijing. While Pi views the pandemic as a huge blow to the museums and focuses on the perceptual limitations of online exhibitions, Zhang sees the need for museums to go virtual as a great opportunity to reach out to younger, less educated and regionally distanced new audiences. Zhang's stance also resonates with that of urban studies researcher Jiang Jun (chapter nine), in that both seem to agree with the PRC's official fostering of new media technology, including its strict censoring. Given the tight monitoring even after the lifting of pandemic regulations and the largely censored "white paper" protests, readers will thus doubt Zhang's optimistic belief in the advantage of a one-party system that controls museum information and citizens' mobility alike.

In sum, Jiang allows us to travel back in time, compare and witness how the beginning of the global pandemic not only fuelled anxieties of cultural difference and national control, but also showed the need to overcome our screens and epistemic borders, to sustain mutual dialogue, while affirming just how related we really are.

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Kunqu: A Classical Opera of Twenty-First-Century China

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In *Kunqu: A Classical Opera of Twenty-First-Century China*, Joseph S. C. Lam introduces kunqu to an English readership "as both a performance and a discourse of Chinese lives and dreams" (p. xiii). Lam claims to present kunqu in a unique way: "holistically" (p. 1). He organizes his 209-page text into ten chapters, constructing kunqu from temporal, spatial, personal, performative, musical, cultural and intercultural perspectives. After stating his goal for a holistic presentation (chapter one) and introducing current kunqu institutions, practitioners, vocabulary and theories (chapter two), Lam investigates the aesthetic, historical and cultural roots in the lasting appeal of kunqu, which he describes as being both "heavenly" and "earthly" (chapters three and four); reviews the individuals that kunqu has been created by, for, and of, as characters inside the plays and people in real life (chapter five); examines kunqu from the perspective of what he refers to as "yuescape"