

Müller, Gotelind: *Representing History in Chinese Media. The TV Drama „Zou Xiang Gonghe“ (Towards the Republic)*. Berlin: LIT Verlag 2007. ISBN: 978-3-8258-0787-0; 224 S.

Rezensioniert von: Thoralf Klein, Kulturwissenschaftliches Kolleg, Universität Konstanz

History is big in contemporary Chinese television. Whether as documentary, soap opera, serious drama or comic parody, it has come to attract mass audiences. Whereas Europeans are likely to be familiar with most of the genres, what is astounding by Western standards is the sheer dimension of some productions. Serials often come in more than 40 episodes; „Zou Xiang Gonghe“, the drama discussed in Gotelind Müller's book, even consists of 60 installments. The reason why this particular production has aroused considerable attention among sinologists and historians of China is the manner in which it proposes a revision of modern Chinese history and the public discussion that ensued after its airing on Chinese Central Television (CCTV).

Strictly speaking, Müller's book is not a monograph. It evolved from a seminar in which students watched and summarized particular episodes, Müller herself provides a lengthy introduction that details the production process and broadcasting and attempts to situate them in the wider context of what history means in contemporary China.

„Zou Xiang Gonghe“ was produced by a private enterprise and broadcast by state-owned CCTV in spring 2003 after four years of filming. Owing to its radical reinterpretation of established history, the series soon sparked heated debates, especially on the Internet. This in turn, alerted the censors who demanded that some episodes be edited, thereby reducing the material by one complete installment. The single most important cut was the concluding speech of Sun Yatsen in the final episode, which was replaced by 20 minutes of blank screen. Under the threat of an impending ban, the rhythm of broadcasting was greatly accelerated. Although the government finally prevented a planned second airing on provincial TV channels, the original script was published and publicly sold, as were both the „truncated“

and the original DVD editions. With the original airing receiving a TV rating of 43 percent, the impact of „Zou Xiang Gonghe“ on society was undoubtedly great.

To contextualize the serial, Müller first takes a look at the transmission of historical knowledge in China. Hitherto, most people have been exposed to the officially sanctioned history in school, where the focus is not on questioning historical narratives, but on memorizing and reproducing historical „facts“. More recently, TV has established itself as an alternative channel for the transmission of historical views. Although the makers of „Zou Xiang Gonghe“ took pains to situate their series within the officially sanctioned limits of „patriotic education“, they also claimed to represent new trends in academic scholarship that had not yet found their way into history textbooks.

The series traces China's development from the monarchy of the Qing dynasty to the Republic. In contrast to earlier productions, it does not end triumphantly with the establishment of a republican government in 1912, but with the fragmentation of the new polity in 1917. The general theme, therefore, is to portray Chinese nation building as an unfinished task. More controversial than the overall plot, however, was the drama's portrayal of certain historical personalities: some figures that had long been vilified as traitors are portrayed favorably as patriots and modernizers, whereas erstwhile heroes, such as the first president of the Republic, Sun Yatsen, are cast in more ambiguous terms. In the series the personalized perspective that is so popular in Chinese history and which Müller takes up in her analysis is complemented by the image of Japan. The arch-villains of textbook history, the Japanese, receive a more ambivalent treatment in „Zou Xiang Gonghe“. Some scenes in the drama (especially Sun Yatsen's final speech that was eventually cut out) seem to suggest a post-communist China and advocate freedom of the press, while others support the widespread popular nationalism that is often at odds with the officially sponsored „patriotism“.

In the final sections, Müller turns to the debates on „Zou Xiang Gonghe“, comparing that series to its predecessor „Heshang“

(„River Elegy“), a similarly controversial documentary aired in 1988. Whereas „Heshang“ suggested a wholesale adoption of Western modernity, a simple political alternative to the existing system, „Zou Xiang Gonghe“ is far more complex, ambiguous, and open to multiple interpretations. Debates focused mostly on the legitimacy of the revised interpretations of historical characters, the attempts to expose their human weaknesses and thus to „humanized“ history itself, the relationship between artistic license and historical accuracy, and the reliability of established textbook versions of history. The general public was divided in its assessment of the series, as were academic historians. At a subliminal level, one observer even interpreted „Zou Xiang Gonghe“ as representing a „neoconservative“ trend seeking to replace the old Marxist historical model of class struggle (p. 21). Ultimately, what comes

into question in and through the serial is to whom history belongs - the party, science, or the media (p. 22). It is therefore part of a diversification of history that gives ordinary people the chance to re-appropriate their own life stories, e.g. in the form of memoirs, oral history, etc. Finally, „Zou Xiang Gonghe“ also raises the question of what Chinese modernity should look like. Its significance for European and American scholars lies in the way it problematizes the task of nation building. After Müller’s introduction, what follows is a documentation of the content of „Zou Xiang Gonghe“ and some background information on its production. Summaries of each episode, divided into its component scenes, make up the bulk of the book, covering about 170 pages. An alphabetic list of the most important characters, biographical information about the leading actresses and actors and the original Chinese texts of the introductory and final songs along with English translations complement the material. The bibliography appended to Müller’s introduction contains references to the published script, the most important contributions to the debate as well as a number of Western scholarly publications on the matter.

The significance of the book, therefore, lies not exclusively in the analysis it provides. More importantly, scholars will find it useful as a re-

search guide to an important media event that contributes a great deal to the understanding of contemporary China.

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