

## Book Review | Chinese Surplus: Biopolitical Aesthetics and the Medically Confined Body, by Ari Larissa Heinrich (Duke University Press, 2018)

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What do Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, plastinated cadavers, and the medical commodification of organs and other body parts have in common? In *Chinese Surplus: Biopolitical Aesthetics and the Medically Commodified Body*, Ari Larissa Heinrich traces the historical and aesthetic linkages between these wide-ranging cultural phenomena to show how an "aesthetics of corporeality" (p. 29) has taken shape in China in relation to (post)coloniality and the global marketplace throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Beginning with Western anxieties and human rights critiques about the alleged Chinese origins of cadavers preserved and displayed as part of the traveling *Body Worlds* exhibit, Heinrich asks whether instead of universalized questions of origins and authenticity that "suppress" (p. 5) race's centrality to definitions of the human, we might trace transnational linkages in the dispersal of body parts to consider contemporary bodily commodification within a longer arc of the "historically overdetermined idea of Chinese life as surplus" (p. 6). Rather than a derivative effect of contemporary biotechnical developments that increasingly dismember the body, "corporeal aesthetics" (p. 14) in China, Heinrich asserts, has long been central to artists', writers', and thinkers' attempts to consider the Chinese body within the intertwined transnational workings of power—geopolitical, economic, and biotechnological.

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*Chinese Surplus* is an ambitious project that weaves together a transnational and transhistorical consideration of aesthetic production and biomedical commodification. Heinrich proposes a theory of “biopolitical aesthetics” (p. 14) and realism that diverges from the history of a Western realism that imagines the dissolution of a unified and authentic body in correspondence with biomedical technologies such as dissection and blood transfusion (p. 31). The “recovered genealogy” (p. 17) of Chinese art and history demonstrates the continued resonances of very different cultural and historical preoccupations rooted in China’s evolving geopolitical situation. To establish this genealogy, Heinrich dwells in the first chapter on nineteenth-century Qing Dynasty and early twentieth-century engagements with bodily fragmentation tied to China’s place in the world. Heinrich convincingly makes the case for the improbable connection between popular nineteenth-century Chinese and Western depictions of China as a “sleeping lion” and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which was first published in 1818 and, as Heinrich notes, not translated into Chinese until 1980 (p. 34). Drawing on historical records, popular discourses, literary texts, and museum artifacts, Heinrich traces the ways in which prominent Chinese political actors came to transform Western discourses of China as a Frankenstein that reflected “deep anxiety about whether sharing technology with China might backfire, inadvertently giving China the power to destroy its ‘creator’” (p. 33). These Chinese thinkers drew on the reference of Frankenstein to meditate on China’s semi-colonial status and geopolitical position. This transnational conception of Frankenstein as a “compartmentalizable political body” (p. 47), Heinrich argues, presents a historical precursor of an already fragmented body that speaks to race, imperialism, and global politics, rather than one of holism and unity.

This divergent genealogy rooted in Chinese particularities leads to contemporary Chinese cultural production and cultural politics in a “more biopolitical modality: a modality of the dead, the disassembled, the deconstructed, the decomposed, and the instrumentalized” (p. 50). This modality is also “diasporic” (p. 32), in that it speaks to body parts parceled out and on the move. In the subsequent chapters, Heinrich turns to the work of Chinese “body artists,” such as those in the Cadaver Group (p. 50), twenty-first-century US- and Hong Kong-based films that involve the organ trade, the undergirding role of race for discourses of the human and human rights in the Body Worlds exhibit, and the mechanization and abject lack of agency ascribed to reproductions of iconic paintings by Chinese painters in Dafen oil painting village in Shenzhen. Across these diverse arenas, Heinrich analyzes how discourses of originality, authenticity, and agency, which are predicated on a Western-centric view of world history, obscure continuities in a cultural awareness of and preoccupation with bodily fragmentation and

circulation that long predates and extends beyond contemporary biotechnologies.

Heinrich's project does the groundbreaking work of connecting the global power dynamics of contemporary cultural productions engaged with fragmentation and labeled inauthentic with longer histories of imperialism. As such, *Chinese Surplus* will be of particular interest to both cultural critics and theorists who are considering cultural production in relation to biotechnical developments and who seek to develop frameworks from within non-Euroamerican histories and spheres of influence. Rather than a coherent and linear historical progression, Heinrich's project can be better said to propose surprising linkages and avenues of contemplation that, like the aesthetic works it examines, begin to gesture to a non-Euroamerican history of aesthetics through transhistorical traces and resonances. This work contributes to the ongoing project of developing frameworks rooted in Chinese histories and cultural lineages, including Shu-mei Shih's *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semi-Colonial China, 1917–1937* (2001) and Xiaomei Chen's *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (1995). As scholarship in literary studies suggests,<sup>1</sup> these frameworks emerging from historical and cultural particularities can also serve as models and foundations for broader theories and histories of aesthetic and cultural production.

Heinrich builds on and extends this ongoing project by proposing generic histories in which "realism" in a Chinese context includes a long engagement with bodily fragmentation across diverse forms of cultural production, into contemporary works' explicit meditations on biotechnically mediated fragmentation. As such, it also resonates with scholarship that considers the development of biomedical knowledge and technologies within longer histories of imperialism and global power dynamics, such as work in feminist science studies that situates forms of clinical and embodied labor within these histories. While the book's definition of Western realism as an aesthetic category is at first somewhat difficult to place, particularly for those readers who may not be familiar with theories of Western realism as a literary genre, the trade-off that Heinrich makes to gloss only a selection of relevant examples of Western realism is understandable given the wide range of genres and disciplines the book engages. Moreover, this methodological choice also enacts the primacy of Chinese histories and forms of production that Heinrich's study theorizes. In doing so, Heinrich reveals how the cultural politics of aesthetic production is integral to understanding the wide-ranging ramifications of biotechnical developments. Reaching beyond the sociocultural, technoscientific, and aesthetic as bounded categories of analysis,

Heinrich's work presents another recent example of how methods and frameworks from different disciplines can illuminate conversations in and between one another, until perhaps one day these boundaries will no longer be so taken for granted.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Eric Hayot's *On Literary Worlds* (2012) engages and complicates theories of world literature and Euroamerican histories of genre categories beyond a Chinese context in part through considering Chinese cultural production.

## Author Bio

**Kathryn Cai** received her Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2019 and is currently a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Interdisciplinary Humanities at Wake Forest University. Her research focuses on broadening the spectrum of affects associated with care labor in transpacific circuits of migration and capital through attending to bodily states and body-environment interactions in Asian American cultural productions.