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China Pop!: Pop Culture, Propaganda, Pacific Pop-Ups by
Shen-mei Ma (review)

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Shen-mei Ma. *China Pop!: Pop Culture, Propaganda, Pacific Pop-Ups*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2024. vii, 274 pp. Hardcover \$119.95, paperback \$36.95, eBook \$36.95, ISBN 978-0-8142-1576-0.

When the craze for PopMart's Labubu figurines reached fever pitch in the spring of 2025, global news outlets eagerly picked up on the rare occurrence of Chinese pop culture finally overcoming its unattractive national stigma. Observers have noted for years that although China's economic status in the world has long overtaken Japan's, its pop culture influence lags far behind its Japanese and Korean counterparts due to the widespread perception that China's state policies are too undemocratic and controlling to cultivate any truly free creativity (Ching 2019, p. 6; Kim 2021, pp. 30–31). The lens of pop culture is the clearest way to make sense of Sheng-mei Ma's *China Pop!: Pop Culture, Propaganda, Pacific Pop-Ups*. This frenetic book is a rare find in scholarly publications for a number of reasons. As Ma himself admits freely throughout the book, the work prides itself on defying genre and crossing borders, resulting in a four-part collection consisting of twelve chapters and a coda. A shocking hybrid of personal and family history, tongue-in-cheek wordplay, and more conventional literary and film analysis, this “runt” or “Four Unlikes” *sibuxiang* 四不像 (both Ma's words, not mine, p. 4) is a challenging read. Considering the recent intellectual trend that pushed for a more “global” version of China studies that speaks equally to those in both Asian American studies and those in Asian studies, *China Pop!* provides one potential avenue.

The book is structured into four main parts, each of which features three chapters that read more like individual essays: Part 1, the most straightforward, is titled “Chinese Pop Culture and Propaganda” and is followed by Part 2, “On the Cultural Revolution.” Parts 3 and 4 in the second half of the book are united in reference to the book's title, the concept of “Pop-Ups”: “White Pop-Ups” and “Off-White Pop-Ups.” The recurring images that run throughout these jarringly

disparate topics are the ghosts that appear like shadows: “wispings, whispering through Chinese popular culture, propaganda, Cultural Revolution discourse, and white and off-white Pacific pop-ups” (p. 6). Kudos to Ma for his thorough and thoughtful analysis in Part 1 of mainstream People’s Republic of China TV dramas, an area of study that until recently has only received minor consideration in media studies. As a formidable media form that reaches a large audience demographic ranging in age and geographic location, popular TV series such as *Minning Town* (2021) and *Nothing But Thirty* (2020) deserve the close critical scrutiny that Ma devotes his attention to in Chapters 1 and 3, respectively. But as he observes, Chinese pop culture has made little impact beyond the Sinosphere: “The power to speak to, if not for, over one billion Sinophone speakers is severely restricted by the fact that these shows are rarely, if ever, translated, subtitled, and distributed via Anglophone global media” (pp. 31–32). With the recent development of generative AI in improving translation and closed-captioning tools, the real test is whether subtitles are the main limiting factor holding back Anglophone audiences.

Ma’s book relishes wordplay and puns; for instance, at the end of Chapter 2, Ma proposes the implications of Chinese as a tonal language by expounding on the multitude of possibilities for the sound “du” (p. 51). According to Ma, “du” in its various tones can stand in for the capital of Beijing, drugs, gambling, crossing, a loner, and independence. This may seem like a curious or even arbitrary observation, but Ma uses this series of definitions to bring the chapter to a pointed conclusion about how ethnic and cultural independence in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan is stigmatized: “this dú or independence comes across as a dirty, hated word in a China imposing its beloved ‘Chinese characteristics’ onto the non-Chinese” (p. 51). Similarly, at the end of Chapter 3, Ma analyzes the “mi” 蜜 in “guimi” 閨蜜 alongside its homophone “mi” 密, to emphasize the tenuous connection between the latter’s mountain 山 radical “shan” and the haunting motif: “Hence, the sweetness and bonding of the fad of boudoir confidantes buoys atop a secret mountain of bones of female ghosts, welling up from imperial to millennial China” (p. 73).

Part 2 consists of three chapters loosely linked by cultural memories of the Cultural Revolution and the Holocaust, a connection that makes more sense in the context of Ma’s explanation of his academic background and interest in survivor

testimonies and fictions. Comparing, for example, the writing of Elie Wiesel to Yang Jiang in Chapter 4, Ma laments again, as in the case of TV dramas, that Yang Jiang's memoirs "*Six and Us Three* remain somewhat obscure even among contemporary Chinese-language readers," and places the blame this time not so much on scarce knowledge about the Cultural Revolution due to insufficient translation, but on "collective amnesia over Maoist extremism" (p. 87). Chapters 5 and 6 address the filmmaker Zhang Yimou's fictional engagement with collective memory and the "unsayable" in *One Second* (2020), *Coming Home* (2014), and *To Live* (1993).

In Parts 3 and 4, the notion of what constitutes "white" versus "off-white" pop-ups is fuzzy. Chapter 7 begins by analyzing playwright Bertolt Brecht's essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" and his 1947 play *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, along with David Hare's 1976 play *Fanshen*. Ma's creatively invented term "AlienAsian" signals the dynamics through which the "Oriental Other provides an 'out' from their Western selfhood, an escape clause from the contractual bond(age) to the West by virtue of birth and cultural upbringing" (p. 126). Building on his orientalist critique, Ma turns to productions of *Miss Saigon* in Chapter 8, followed by Disney's 2020 live-action version of *Mulan* directed by Niki Caro in Chapter 9. While Ma's analysis is insightful and provocative, the rationale for grouping these chapters together under the category of "white pop-ups" is unclear, other than the author's very broad claim that these works are "by, and for the West" (p. 162).

Chapters 10–12 in Part 4 suggest that "off-white" pop-ups are either narratives about Asian-American experience (*Eat a Bowl of Tea*, *Saving Face*, *The Farewell*, and *Minari*) or those directed by Asian-Americans (Ang Lee's *Ride with the Devil*). Ma asserts that ethnic stories are "produced and consumed jointly by white and nonwhite—particularly off-white, 'yellow-ish,' or Asian American in the case at hand—artists and audiences" (p. 165). While seeing these disparate works gathered from across film historiography and genre discussed in one breath is indeed refreshing, the underlying question of what is gained by presenting the reader with such an eclectic array of cinematic texts remains. For anyone searching for the answer to this enticing puzzle in the book's conclusion, the Coda offers little hope by raising yet another layer of complexity in *laobing* (literally translated

as old soldiers, usually referring to Nationalist veterans), the phantom-like figure that is frequently depicted in Taiwanese *waishengren* literature and film, such as Long Yingtai's *Big River Big Ocean 1949* (p. 223). This last chapter does, however, drive home Ma's argument about traumatic history, that no matter the language, media, or nation, it "pops" up unavoidably in all cultural crevices.

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