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*Special Issue:*

Trajectories of Cultural Diplomacy:

East Asian Texts and Artefacts in the Anglosphere

## TRAJECTORIES OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: INTRODUCTION

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This special issue started as a panel titled “Trajectories of Cultural Diplomacy” at the NZASIA Biennial International Conference in Wellington (November 24–27). “Cultural diplomacy” and “soft power” were buzz words, a highlight of the conference being the celebration of the publication of *China in Australasia: Cultural Diplomacy and Chinese Arts since the Cold War*. In the introduction to *China in Australasia*, the editors delineate the trajectories through which resources from “a nation’s culture” could be channeled into diverse agendas of influence. A “subsection of public diplomacy,” cultural diplomacy is enabled by official endorsement or sponsorship, yet, as the editors of the volume argue for the case of the PRC’s “soft-power strategies,” there is a “lacuna” in recognizing its significance (p. 4). The lacuna of addressing the “role the arts have played in shaping the nature of relations between nations” (ibid.) is an intriguing proposition not only because it could be so easily reversed into questioning “the role the nature of relations between nations” have played in shaping art exchange. In an earlier publication Alexander Bukh (2014) critiques the “agent-level approach” in his overview of Japan’s soft power, which draws our attention to the “international ideational structures” that inform both discourses on national identity and cultural diplomacy. *China in Australasia* also invites a larger geopolitical perspective extending from global powers such as the USA and the UK to pacific nations such as Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Samoa, as a larger frame to its case studies, but as the two book reviews suggest, there are a number of fascinating questions concerning the personal and even idiosyncratic agency within institutional or semi-institutional structures of cultural exchange.

For humanities-informed approaches, as demonstrated in the four essays to follow, it is precisely the “limitations in terms of their ability to shape relations between countries” (p. 8), that provide a certain critical distance from the instrumentalization of artistic practice. The lacuna in placing culture within soft power is indicative of the complexity of situating creative practices within political and economic relations. Building on existing research, the editors refer to characteristics facilitating the selection of cultural resources such as “the acceptable,” “the apolitical,” and “the harmless,” alongside with “the traditional” which reserves a prioritized relationship with such resources. The four essays address the introduction of cultural material from Japan and China to Britain, America, and New Zealand across a wide historical span focusing specifically on the periods of the late 1800s, 1950s, 1980s, and the modern day. It is true that the cultural material from the East is colored by a fascination with tradition

drawn from stories of honor and courage of the Japanese samurai class, Chinese ghost stories, the philosophy of Japanese ceramics, and Chinese ancestor worship. All four essays emphasize the role of the mediators: Mitford, Lin Yutang, James Greig, and Renee Liang, the so-called “cultural ambassadors” in not only reshaping this traditional material, but also in interrogating the boundaries of the apolitical.

The efforts of these “cultural agents” – to borrow the term Florian Knothe applied to the philanthropists dedicated to collecting Chinese art in the West – are officially endorsed and sponsored in varying degrees. Even in the case of Mitford, who took a significant financial risk by the publication of his *Tales*, the hours spent on compiling and writing were secured amidst paperwork and English lessons within the premises of the British legation in Tokyo. A diplomat in the strict sense, Mitford’s cultural foray points simultaneously at the connection between his diplomatic and literary careers and their divergence, which is what Anna Gubinskaya argues in her essay. “The role of the nature of the relations between nations,” that is imperialism, behind Mitford’s cultural diplomacy, demonstrates how cultural appreciation can take a voyeuristic form in the face of blood-curdling violence. Lin Yutang establishes himself as a popularizer of Chinese culture with the encouragement of a Nobel Prize awardee, while their common background of missionary Christianity displays another aspect of East Asian modernization. In *Famous Chinese Short Stories*, Lin deals with Chinese “tradition” in a manner comparative to Mitford’s *Tales*, projecting the marketable image of Asia as exotic and untainted by westernization. As Liu Min’s essay shows however, Lin’s treatment of “tradition” is strategic in precisely narrowing the gap between Chinese culture and modernity and its apolitical aspect – a sign of individual autonomy. Both collections of stories harness the soft power of collective narrative traditions of Japan and China, hinging on various proportions of strangeness and familiarity. Actual military conflicts involve British and American interests in Asia at the time of these publications.

The geopolitical paradigm change can be symbolized by Japan’s hosting of Expo 1970, whereas New Zealand as a site of reception of Asian culture offers important insights into the economic shifts in the region. Japan is the place to learn from in the field of ceramics, and the New Zealand potter James Greig chose as his inspiration a Japanese potter equally traditional and eccentric. Greig’s study of Japanese tradition, including Buddhist aesthetics, is filtered through the work of an individual, and as Kumiko Jacolin demonstrates, Greig’s combination of work with clay and writing evokes a more abstract yet personal language for cross-cultural exchange. The spirituality, emanating from Greig’s pursuit of artistic enlightenment, is an example of the “apolitical” lacunae protected by economic growth and political stability. Japanese tradition here, even if not fully submitted to scrutiny, involves a riskier self-transformation beyond Mitford’s admiration and Lin’s aspiration for universalism.

The *Bone Feeder*, critically examined by Luo Hui, shows a range of recent developments on the themes of acceptability and harmlessness amidst contesting frameworks of empowerment and disempowerment in multicultural New Zealand (including the fact that Renee Liang is the only female cultural agent among the four case studies and that the coherence of a national is not self-evident). The minority’s

cultural production already raises questions of representability, intensified by the play's advance into the grand scale of opera. The discussion on Lin Yutang prepares us to think of the strategic retrieval of Chinese tradition as a site for identity negotiations. However, the revolutionary aspect of the staging of singers of Asian descent and having them perform as Chinese New Zealanders is astounding, especially when juxtaposed with the limited scope of Asian roles in the operas of Mitford's days. The cultural and cross-cultural performativity revolving around tradition is also placed in sharper focus in Luo Hui's analysis, alongside its boundary-crossing dimension and critical potential. The way the Chinese ancestral worship ritual is staged in Liang's work effectively blurs the boundary between ritual and performance. Ritual becomes performance and performance is ritual. Since the ritual here resurrects the memory of a historical trauma against a broader background of political and economic injustice, the ritual is directed at placating the ghosts of history to counter historical amnesia or retaliatory sentiments.

The burial sites of the Chinese-New Zealand ancestors are a heterotopy beyond the boundary protected by the Maori ferryman, allegorizing the threshold between life and death. In retrospect, Greig's homage to Kawai Kanjirō, Lin Yutang's summoning of ghosts, and Mitford's honoring of Japanese heroes' graves appear to be precarious models of inclusivity, which once celebrated can easily regress into exclusiveness and exclusion. Cultural diplomacy is a ritual of communication which demands constant vigilance over the potential silence of the other side.

### **Bibliography**

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### **Biographical Note**

Dennitza Gabrakova teaches Japanese at Victoria University of Wellington and is interested in postcolonial critiques, translation studies and the environmental humanities. She is the author of *The Unnamable Archipelago: Reading the Wounds of the Postcolonial and Postwar Japanese Literature and Thought* (Brill, 2018).

