

John A. Crespi. *Voices in Revolution: Poetry and the Auditory Imagination in Modern China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. 228 pp. Hardcover \$47.00, ISBN 978-0-8248-3365-7.

For as long as poetry has been written, it has been heard. Whether recited, chanted, sung, narrated, dramatized, or simply *read*, the history of poetry in any language is intimately bound to those occasions upon which words become sound, as well as to the efforts poets devote to ensuring these sounds resonate with and are heard by others. This is especially true in modern China, where poetry has been charged with the lofty duty of helping revitalize and modernize the nation, and where poets' voices have, by turns, been coaxed, amplified, suppressed, championed, derided, manipulated, and ignored. The centrality of the human voice to the creation and propagation of modern Chinese poetry is, however, a topic that has been largely overlooked by most scholars of new poetry both inside and outside of China. *Voices in Revolution: Poetry and the Auditory Imagination in Modern China* charts new territory in its ambitious and broad-ranging exploration of what sound, voice, and recitation have meant to modern Chinese poets from the earliest days of the Chinese republic through today's post-socialist China.

Crespi's book tells us three stories, inextricably intertwined in the development of modern Chinese poetry. The first is a history of the practice of poetry recitation in mainland China, a story that Crespi traces back to long before poetry was ever read aloud with any conviction or regularity, and concludes with his treatment of contemporary poetry recitals and their function in the culture and economy. The second is a chronology of auditory aesthetics: an analysis of modern Chinese poetry's relation to sound, musicality, and the human voice, ascertained from the poetic writings of modern Chinese poets and critics. Finally, *Voices in Revolution* tells a fascinating, alternative story of China's twentieth-century quest for modernity, as seen through the prism of poetry and voice. The subject matter itself may be relatively understudied, but this narrative is common to almost all scholarly treatments of modern Chinese literature and culture. It involves the struggle over the social and political roles of literature and the people who write it. Furthermore, it addresses the question of how to make China both identifiably Chinese and yet a part of the modern world. Thus, it asserts a newly imagined nationalist subjectivity while holding onto an authentic past, rooted in history, language, and the Chinese people.

The resourcefulness required to pull off a project of this nature should not be underestimated. As Crespi acknowledges in the introduction, poetry recitation is a tricky subject to tackle. For one, there is the question of how to approach

an object of study that is by nature ephemeral. Even if one has access to audio or video recordings of recited poetry (which largely do not exist prior to the 2000s), a recording alone can neither preserve nor fully capture the context, atmosphere, physical environment, human presence, and other factors that constitute the moment of sounded poetry. Furthermore, and partly due to the lack of prior studies on the topic, any researcher faces a paucity of critical vocabulary—a common language with which to describe, analyze, and theorize upon the sounds of poetry as it happens and as imagined by those who write it. Crespi has done a service to future researchers by identifying existing terminology used by scholars such as Charles Bernstein, Paul Zumthor, and Douglas Kahn, who write on auditory culture outside of China (thus tying his scholarship into a broader critical framework related to the study of sound) and by adapting and building upon this terminology to develop a discourse specifically tailored to the Chinese experience.

Another long-standing obstruction to the academic study of poetry recitation in China has been its association with orthodox politics, and in particular its cooption by the Maoist cultural establishment. The Mao-era history of poetry recitation has not just helped shape a widely recognized mainstream “recitational aesthetic” (p. 12), but has also, less productively, led to an assumption among many researchers that poetry recitation is too politically inflected (and thus aesthetically deficient) to be worth studying. The logic here appears to be that poetry is either for *art's sake* or for *life's sake*—or politics' sake—with very little possibility in between. *Voices in Revolution* tackles these challenges directly, demonstrating the limitations of such dichotomous understandings of modern Chinese literature and revealing new themes in the theory and practice of modern Chinese poetry.

Crespi's book is divided into seven chronologically arranged chapters, each of which deals with a distinct moment in the relationship between sound and voice in modern Chinese poetry. Given the lack of a concrete, easily definable or reproducible text that is the poetry recitation event, Crespi has sought out a remarkable variety of source materials on which to base his analysis. Worth pointing out is the relative scarcity of poems. (The first complete poem does not appear until page 54, and actual poetry recitation events are not discussed until chapter 4.) Consequently, the early focus is on the verse-external poetics of sound and voice—including writings by such literary luminaries as Lu Xun, Hu Shi, Zhou Zuoren, and Yu Pingbo—and the earliest theories by members of the China Poetry Society on the possibility of producing poetry specifically for recitation. Elsewhere, Crespi draws from materials as diverse as newspaper literary supplements, performances reviews, memoirs, diaries, journal articles, photographs, recitation primers, and, in the final chapter, his own extensive fieldwork as a participant-observer at mainland Chinese poetry recitations. Using these materials and experiences, he paints a vivid picture of changing attitudes toward poetic recitation, the obstacles faced by poets in getting their voices heard, the political challenges and incentives of participating in such activities, and the reception

of poetry recitation by other poets as well as by the general—and, it transpires, frequently nonplussed—Chinese public. A particularly entertaining anecdote in this respect can be found in chapter 2. Crespi cites Dai Wangshu's 1937 essay "On National Defense Poetry," and Dai's experience of reading aloud a National Defense (*guofang*) poem to a nearby member of the *masses*. The construction worker's disheartening reaction has surely been heard a million times since—before uttering an "uncouth phrase," he responds with "I don't understand it, and it sounds terrible," and "What a bore—a load of rubbish!" (pp. 6–7).

If Crespi's creative pooling of resources suggests an interdisciplinary approach that expands his field of interest beyond poetry to include a range of critical, sociological, political, and visual materials and perspectives, the same, too, can be said of the critical language with which he makes his arguments. First, *Voices in Revolution* employs a definition of sound that is concerned with more than simply "specific acoustic events"; rather it encompasses "those representations of sound that constitute and shape the social, cultural, intellectual, and historical experience of how and what one hears" (p. 7). This expanded understanding of sound allows Crespi to trace his history of poetry recitation back as far as Lu Xun's 1908 essay "On the Power of Mara Poetry," in which Lu Xun alludes to the potential of the sounds of poetry to "destabilize the status quo" (p. 27) but does not yet advise that poetry should actually be recited out loud. In essence, Crespi's approach enables consideration of any text that touches upon sound, orality, or voice, no matter how obliquely. Although there is the odd occasion when the links seem invented—such as at the end of chapter 1, when he concludes his discussion of Yu Pingbo's ruminations on popular poetry by commenting on the musicality of Yu's final exclamatory couplet (p. 42)—this is a constructive framework for studying the importance of sound and voice to modern Chinese poetry, or literature more generally, and is employed by Crespi to great success.

Among the more challenging concepts put forward in this book is that of "national interiority," first introduced in chapter 1 and then revisited at regular intervals throughout the first half of the book. This idea emerges from Crespi's analysis of Lu Xun's essay on Mara poetry and its combination of auditory imagery and nationalist ideology (p. 25). According to Crespi's definition, national interiority refers to the "tendency to find the origins of poetry (and literature in general) in a spontaneous, emotional, sincere, expressive interior." The "national" part is introduced through metonymy to encompass "a larger interior time-space of nation, one constituted by an imagination of the People as the authentic constituents of the nation" (p. 25). Crespi explains in a footnote that he borrows the term from Dimitris Tziouvas's study of the Greek demoticist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He sees it as a way of emphasizing inner subjectivity while avoiding the word "interior," used during the War of Resistance against Japan to refer to China's hinterland (p. 190, n. 3). At times, it feels as though a little too much is expected of this concept. On the one hand, it

conveniently combines two of the prevalent understandings of literary creativity with which Crespi grapples for much of the first four chapters: linguistic and literary nationalism, adopted from the West in the first two decades of the twentieth century; and local “ethnopoetics,” shaped by historical understandings of poetry as something that emerges spontaneously and authentically from the people and discerned as far back as the “Great Preface” to the *Book of Songs* (pp. 20–23). On the other hand, holding onto the entire concept when it reappears at various points later in the book can be difficult. National interiority, it seems, is capable of generating emotion (p. 59) and containing “experiential conditions” (p. 31); it is constituted of “prelinguistic thought and feeling” (p. 48), and exists in linguistic form (p. 42) as well as outside of poetry (p. 44). Such terminological complexity likely results in part from writing about a previously understudied topic using a newly developed critical language; large parts of *Voices in Revolution* may seem dauntingly impenetrable to the novice reader and, perhaps, to undergraduate students of modern Chinese literature.

One of Crespi’s biggest contributions in terms of creating a critical framework for his subject is the notion of the “poem-as-event,” put forward in chapters 5 and 7, on Zhu Ziqing’s poetics and post-2000 poetry recitation, respectively. Most researchers of poetry-off-the-page agree to the need to pay attention to more than just the sounded words of the poem. As Peter Middleton helpfully puts it, poems “work simultaneously along axes of speech, writing, body, person, sociality, and abstraction (or artifice).”¹ Considering the text of poems alone, in other words, is never going to be sufficient for understanding the ways in which meaning is asserted and negotiated at various points in the creation, dissemination, and consumption of poetry. Zhu Ziqing was clearly aware of this when, in Beijing in the late 1940s, he used his poetry and critical writings to emphasize the importance of performance time and space over the “essentialized inner world of subjective content” (p. 130), the starting point of most early modern Chinese poetics discussed thus far.

Zhu’s situational (or to use Paul Zumthor’s terminology, “sociocorporeal”—a word that features prominently in Crespi’s discussion) understanding of poetry recitation—which earns him a whole chapter to himself—in many ways foreshadows Crespi’s own analysis of contemporary poetry recitation from the perspective of the cultural event (*huodong*). This chapter, “From *Yundong* to *Huodong*: The Value of Poetry Recitation in Postsocialist China,” shifts the emphasis away from the questions of how the sounds of poetry are imagined, how poetry is recited, and why poets might choose to, or be asked to, recite their work, to the economics and sociology of poetry recitation events in contemporary China. Crespi’s deconstruction of the words “movement” (*yundong*) and “event” (*huodong*) (pp. 174–176) is enlightening and offers a conceptualization of contemporary Chinese culture that could be employed productively by scholars in fields other than poetry. In short, China has witnessed, argues Crespi, a transition from “the cen-

trally initiated, politically coercive form of the mass movement as a way of mobilizing its population to meet larger development goals” to the “decentralized and highly autonomous practice of staging events” (p. 170). Rather than mobilizing the masses, the Chinese government—motivated by the logic of the “culture-economy,” a concept Crespi borrows from Jing Wang—now encourages the mobilization of culture itself, to act as a form of “value added” (p. 178) for various commodities and industries. In doing so, it raises the profile of domestically produced Chinese culture in China and abroad.

A striking example of this phenomenon, which forms the subject of chapter 7, is poetry’s mobilization by land. Since the mid-2000s, Chinese real-estate developers have been sponsoring poetry events with some regularity, associating themselves with poetry in the hope that its perceived moral and economic purity might help clean up the image of the real-estate world (p. 181). In other words, despite its economic disenfranchisement and social marginalization, poetry finds itself able to enter into a kind of business transaction with real-estate companies, trading symbolic capital for economic capital. A question that I know gives some Chinese poets pause for thought—and to which Crespi only briefly alludes towards the end of the book—is what poetry’s implication in the culture-economy means for the independence of so-called independent (or unofficial) poetry. Given that this poetry is independent precisely because it stands to benefit from maintaining distance from the political and cultural mainstream, one wonders whether this autonomy might be compromised by its involvement in the world of business, operating under Communist Party economic logic. Since independence is the very feature that has enabled poetry’s appropriation by the culture-economy in the first place, this might end up becoming something of a self-defeating paradox: if poets seem too eager to cooperate with big business, they might jeopardize their untarnished image, and thus simultaneously lose their cultural appeal. Crespi’s conclusion in this respect is slightly less than satisfying, but perhaps reflects the ambivalence of many contemporary Chinese poets. While his goal is not to “decry the ‘selling out’ of the contemporary Chinese poetry scene” (p. 187), he does remark that even as poets celebrate a “renaissance” of their art in China today, they would be wise to remember that “poetry of the spoken word is never as independent as one might think” (p. 188).

Questions of independence and political control underlie the previous chapter too. “Calculated Passions: The Lyric and the Theatric in Mao-Era Poetry Recitation” seeks to complicate widespread oversimplifications in the early 1960s as “dominated by a seamlessly monolithic political aesthetic of cultural production and reception” (p. 142). Crespi does this in two ways. First, he offers a nuanced portrayal of the dual challenge faced by poets during this era, who had to satisfy both the “lyrical” and the “theatric” requirements (pp. 150–151) in their poetry recitations. Poetry’s association with the lyrical is a key theme running throughout chapters 1 to 4. Crespi dedicates much of his discussion of early modern poet-

ics to poetry's need to project emotion, and for that emotion to be perceived as genuine. This lyrical orientation did not disappear after 1949, but rather became tied up with the equally important demand on poets to participate in Communist China's "logic of the stage" (p. 149), whereby poetry recitation had to be dramatic, ideologically convinced, and politically convincing. These demands were pedantically spelled out in "recitation primers" produced at the time, another fascinating discovery of Crespi's in this chapter. Underscoring continuity is Crespi's other strategy here. Rather than depicting Mao-era poetry as an interruption to or aberration in the history of modern poetry (or ignoring it altogether, as many researchers have done), he draws attention to the continuing poetic concerns that run over from the May Fourth Movement to the War of Resistance years, and again through to the 1960s and beyond. Likewise, the influence of the Maoist recitational aesthetic does not suddenly disappear after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of China's reform and opening up. The Misty Poets' predilection for reciting their poetry before crowds of thousands of adulating fans, along with the strident tone of certain poems like Bei Dao's "The Answer," suggests this younger, ostensibly rebellious generation of poets was not entirely successful in shaking themselves free of the aesthetic limitations of Mao-era revolutionary lyricism (pp. 164–165).

At the risk of sounding too demanding, I find myself wishing Crespi had explored one or two areas a little further, particularly in the final chapter of the book. Although he explains at some length that his own participation in multiple poetry recitation events in 2005 and 2006 led him to believe that the significance of these events lay not so much in the act of recitation but rather in "the flourishing social practice of the cultural event" (p. 173), certainly much more could have been written on poetry recitation that Crespi chooses to ignore. It may well have been beyond the scope of this particular book to deal with "how recitation elevated language above the everyday—from voicing to text selection, gesture, costume, music or sound effects, *mise en scene*, and even advertising" (p. 172). Nonetheless, I would have liked to hear Crespi's thoughts on a few of these aspects, as well as questions such as why standard Mandarin Chinese continues as the preferred dialect for poetry recitation in China (a topic mentioned briefly in chapter 6), and how the *art-for-art's-sake* versus *art-for-life's-sake* debate (featured repeatedly throughout the first few chapters) continues to rage in the contemporary poetry scene. Is the enduring dominance of Mandarin recitation in some way linked to the idea of national interiority, which is absent from this final chapter of the book? That Crespi leaves the reader wanting more is a good thing. This brilliantly researched and thoughtfully considered book certainly opens many doors to future research.

Voices in Revolution makes a powerful argument for the centrality of sound and voice in modern Chinese poetry and represents a timely and important contribution to the field of modern Chinese literature and culture. More than anything, it shows us how intricately bound modern Chinese poetry has always been in the perception of China as a modern nation and the unanimous goal of China's writers, intellectuals, and leaders—regardless of the political context—to let China's voice be heard.

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NOTE

1. Peter Middleton, *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), p. xii.



William Theodore De Bary, with contributions by Cheung Chan Fai and Kwan Tze-wan. *Confucian Tradition and Global Education*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. iii, 113 pp. Hardcover \$32.50, ISBN 978-962-996-304-0.

William Theodore De Bary's most recent book, *Confucian Tradition and Global Education*, is a collection of lectures given in honor of Tang Junyi, with two additional essays by Cheung Chan Fai and Kwan Tze-wan. The book surveys a constellation of themes concerning the place of the Confucian tradition in the contemporary world and the role of Asian classics in global liberal education. De Bary thoughtfully presents the case that not only are Confucian and neo-Confucian works relevant for a truly liberal—and thus global—education, but that repossession of the Confucian tradition by China and other countries heavily influenced by Confucian thought is crucial in the contemporary world. While De Bary is best known for his philosophical scholarship, this book is not narrowly located in Chinese or Asian philosophy. With its focus on issues of education, it addresses many different areas within the humanities, including questions about the purpose of humanities education itself.

De Bary opens the book with a few personal remarks on the origin of his relationships with Tang Junyi, Qian Mu, and New Asia College (now the Chinese