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BARBARA HOSTER:

*Konversion zum Christentum in der modernen chinesischen Literatur: Su Xuelins Roman Jixin (Dornenherz, 1929).*

(Deutsche Ostasienstudien 29.) vi, 322 pp. Gossenberg: OSTASIEN Verlag, 2017. € 35.80. ISBN 978-3-946114-30-7.

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Conversion to Christianity. A powerful concept which, in the case of China's modern history, evokes the most controversial reactions, ranging from intercultural exchange to the imposition of alien concepts and the outright imposition of colonial superstructures. Barbara Hoster's doctoral research topic is, however, of a distinctly different nature. Rather than analysing the impact of Western missions overseas, Hoster dissects the mind of a young woman, who had arrived during the 1920s in France as a student and whose profuse writings focused on the encounter of different cultural, political and not least gender-related discourses in the shape of people who became part of the young author's life. "Conversion to Christianity in modern Chinese literature: Su Xuelin's novel *Jixin* (Heart of Thorns, 1929)" thus describes the tribulations of a young woman who felt at odds with the 'progressive' winds which were sweeping the intellectual landscape of the 1920s, and who reacted by seeking solace in the spiritual world which she encountered during her sojourn at the Institut Franco-Chinois in Lyon during the early 1920s. Su Xuelin 蘇雪林 (1897–1999) was the daughter of a traditional scholar official family in the Lower Yangtse Valley, who had thus become imbued with the "Confucian" / 儒學 value system in the late imperial Chinese tradition. Simultaneously, Su Xuelin aspired to be educated to the same degree as her father and his fellow male intellectuals, resulting in schooling provided by American missionaries and pedagogical training at the provincial normal university of Anhui. Not content with secondary education, Su Xuelin enrolled at the Beijing Normal Women's College 北京高等女子師範 in 1919 – coinciding with the literary and political storm which the May Fourth movement would engender. But the fact that a young woman was aiming for the same challenges and privileges as her male colleagues did not mean that she agreed with the protagonists of the movement. If anything, Su Xuelin began to counter the opinions of its 'progressive' leadership, most intensely so concerning the views of Lu Xun 魯迅, whose work she felt to be clearly detrimental to China's youth. Increasingly weary of the constant intellectual and ideological struggles of this period, Su Xuelin decided to continue her education at the recently established Franco-Chinese institute in Lyon. It was during this period in her life that she first encountered representatives of Catholic Christianity – a faith which would come to complement her world view rather than in any major way transform it. The powerful emotions which this at times painful spiritual experience entailed are reflected in the topic analysed in Hoster's study, namely her novel *Jixin* 棘心 'Heart of Thorns'.

Whilst much can be said about the socio-political transformations of this agitated political period, the decisive impetus which led Su Xuelin to experiment with intellectual and religious concepts, and also to unleash an unceasing productive flow of literary work, is most likely to be found in the relationship with her husband, Zhang Baoling 張寶齡. Zhang was an intellectual match to his wife, himself an MIT graduate in engineering, a scientifically-minded intellectual open to the West. Betrothed according to Chinese

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tradition, i.e. in a parentally determined marriage, the couple experienced a period of nuptial bliss, followed by a gradual deterioration caused by her husband's irritable temper. Nevertheless, Su Xuelin managed to produce prolifically, overcoming their domestic disagreements with an inherent ability to create idealised love lives and scenes of domestic harmony. Once again, as in her antagonistic coexistence with China's new intellectual elite, it was adversity and personal pain which brought out the best in Su Xuelin's abilities.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the novel forming the analytical centre piece of this monograph. Published under the pseudonym Lü Yi 綠漪 ('Green Ripple') in May 1929, one full decade after the genesis of the May Fourth movement and almost as long since her voyage to France, 'Heart of Thorns' (*Jixin* 棘心) became a first milestone on Su Xuelin's literary journey. The novel amalgamated a tortuous, and often contradictory life experience, with her intellectual, emotional and spiritual discoveries into one holistic rendering of the protagonist Du Xingqiu's life. There is no shortage of autobiographic references – starting with the family name of the author's mother (Du 杜) to Xingqiu's sojourn in Paris, where she, in strict analogy to her literary creator, converts to Christianity. Hoster devotes two of her five core chapters, three and five, to the analysis of the novel: one dedicated to the political background, the allure of the West and in particular France, combined with the complex relationship between daughter and mother, as well as youthful love and idealism; the other to the subject of the protagonist's conversion. The latter is introduced in considerable depth in a chapter of its own, chapter 4, namely within a Chinese cultural context, as a subject in literary narration, but also in theological terms. And particularly the latter aspect caught Hoster's attention. Referring in great detail to the psychological studies by Lewis Rambo, Hoster sketches different interpretations of the reasons for this radical act, of the circumstances during which the conversion occurred and, crucially, of the consequences in the convert's psychology and everyday life. The apparent lack of any major consequences captivates Hoster, who devotes far more space to this phenomenon than to any other historical, personal or religious act in her book. Over some forty pages, the terminology used to describe the conversion process and its aftermath is scrutinised. Is this the key to understanding the characters employed in the title – the tortured heart of the Virgin-Mother Mary? Or the tender mind of the little child who, just like the jujube plant mentioned in the Confucian 'Book of Songs' (*Shijing* 詩經), requires the tender care of its mother in order to withstand the adverse conditions of the outside world? And finally, to what extent is the novel an autobiographic account of Su Xuelin's fascinating life? Ultimately we do not know the answer. But the readers of Barbara Hoster's book will know one thing with certainty, namely that the author has accomplished an impressive feat in the analysis of this interesting novel, its perplexing author and of the contradictory and truly revolutionary times in which it was created.

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