

Enticement: Stories of Tibet

Natalia Moskaleva



Reviewed title

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Pema Tseden. 2018. ed. and trans. by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and Michael Monhart

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Enticement is a new window into contemporary literature about Tibet created by a Tibetan author and made accessible for all by its translators in English. Originality of the stories' plots, which to some extent could even be called exotic, runs hand in hand with descriptions of universally shared feelings and challenges experienced by many people in their everyday life. Being a graphic piece of art, the book pictures a beautiful faraway world of Tibetan grassland, snowy mountains, and local people. Witty, naive, cunning, loving, joking, or distressed and going through hardship Tibetan characters frequently remind a reader of something personal and forgotten. The stories could refresh a memory from one's childhood, something once felt or seen somewhere else. However, at the same time, a peculiar twist or twists of each story returns the reader back to the realities of Tibet.

As Pema Tseden puts it in the Author's Preface: "Many times I write fiction for no other reason than to enter this state in which I can see and know myself more deeply. ... All the words you want to say can be found in the texts you write" (p.1). *Enticement*, indeed, does not show modern Tibet as a flat postcard. Tseden's words written down as stories set a reader on a trip of deeper

contemplation – deeper into the wondering minds of Tibetans and deeper into one's own inner world. *Enticement* as a compilation of ten stories touches upon completely different aspects of life: friendship, love and care, birth and death, treachery, loyalty, cruelty, modernization and globalization, Buddhist beliefs and local superstitions, extraordinary coincidences, and human reflections about life. While many stories tend to present rather realistic descriptions, in terms of literary styles one could encounter elements of traditional Tibetan folk tales (e.g. the traditional frame of the Golden Corpse Tales), examples of magical realism, or even science fiction.

Interwoven with Buddhist themes and traditional Tibetan cultural markers, *Enticement* goes further beyond the commonly understood topics of human happiness or grief. Tseden introduces a reader to the way of life on the Tibetan Plateau that is gradually going through changes. Alongside the main line of the plot, the author offers a glimpse of modern Tibet and the ongoing social transformations there: be it the existing tradition of religious reincarnations facing the modernity, Mao Zedong's literary heritage still vividly living in the memory of Tibetan people, first encounters of Tibetans with a modern flow of Westerners enchanted with Tibetan culture, rural Tibetans not being able to speak Chinese or lacking the practical grasp of the urban Tibetan population and being beguiled by them, Tibetans being swept over by the wave of modernization in the form of

compulsory ID registration, or struggling with the gambling plague.

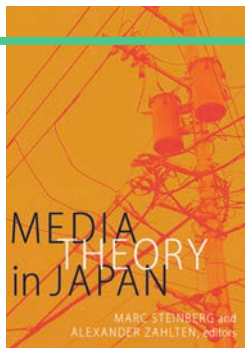
The reader is travelling through Tibetan villages, cities and pastures. One gets to meet the curious minds seeking to see a bigger picture behind the average routine life, one gets to laugh at the funny perplexities of life, one gets to share the joy and pain of the protagonists, one gets to peek into modern Tibet and the various happenings there. Besides, there is no politics or anything didactical. These stories describe things simply as they are, void of any moralization. *Enticement* is Tibetan and universal at the same time. Despite the fact that the protagonists are Tibetan and are living in the conditions quite often unfamiliar for the bulk of us, a reader still can relate to their feelings. Most stories finely catch your attention and keep in suspense till the end.

I can assume that the perception of Tseden's stories might vary for a reader with a different cultural background. However, being limited as a Western urban dweller and a Tibetan Studies student, I believe that *Enticement* is an exciting ride in the world with Tibetan flavour worth taking by anyone – be it a keen Tibetologist or any other interested reader. I would highly recommend reading this book to any reader willing to learn more of modern Tibet and would certainly suggest adding this book to a reading list for classes on modern Tibetan literature or culture.

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Media Theory in Japan

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Reviewed title

Media Theory in Japan

Marc Steinberg and Alexander Zahlten (eds). 2017.

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Dating back to the 1950s at least, the study of Japanese film can rightly be considered a venerable discipline in Western academia. Its research agendas, though, have to a significant extent been decided by scholars' mastery of the Japanese language, or rather by the lack thereof. This has at times resulted in what Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto has identified as an "interpretative machine", which supplied scholars, even those who lacked linguistic skills, with 'stock images of national character, tradition, and fixed cultural traits' that allowed them to 'understand' and comment on their research object.

Partially as an extension of this problem, scholarship has also suffered from a skewed perspective, with Japan's films and filmmakers receiving ample devotion, but scant attention being paid to the country's wider media landscape, even at a time when Film Studies has widely evolved to include media more broadly. This is a rather peculiar phenomenon, since, as Marc Steinberg and Alexander Zahlten point out in the introduction to their new anthology *Media Theory in Japan*, Japan possesses "one of the largest and most complex media industries on the planet" (p.2). Not only does it make sense for scholars to more frequently consider it as a case study, but Japan also is a nation with its own long and chequered history of theoretical writing on media. As Akira Mizuta Lippit observes in a preface that is, characteristically, as playful as it is challenging: for too long have we thought that understanding and theorizing media only happens in the West – even when the media themselves were made elsewhere.

This blank spot which Japan currently occupies on the 'Euro-American media-theoretical map' is allegorized most effectively in Marilyn Ivy's contribution to this volume, which begins with the realization that she is the first person to ever check out from her university library a volume of *InterCommunication*, one of Japan's most authoritative journals of media scholarship, which ran from 1992 through 2000. So either there are too few Western media scholars that can read Japanese – an understandable phenomenon – or too few Japanologists have an interest in media studies. Probably, it is a good deal of both.

Media Theory in Japan boldly volunteers to begin filling this gap. It does not limit its ambitions there, however; as Steinberg and Zahlten point out, this is not just the first 'systematic introduction to and contextualization of' the history of Japanese media theory in the English language, it is the first book to do this in any language, including Japanese. Aware of the challenges their pioneering effort faces, the editors propose a shift in how to view concept of 'media theory', away from a deceptive pretence at universality that is in fact firmly Western-centric, and toward seeing it as "a practice composed of local, medium-specific, and culture-inflected practices" (p.6).

Steinberg and Zahlten are no strangers to such an approach, having deftly demonstrated its pertinence in their respective monographs *Anime's Media Mix* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012) and *The End of Japanese Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2017). Both these

volumes investigated examples of the kind of constellations of interlocking and cross-fertilising media and their social functions that we have come to refer to as media ecologies.

The scope of what *Media Theory in Japan* considers as constituting 'media' is wide and varied. Some are familiar staples, such as Aaron Gerow's essay on television theory in Japan, in which he observes how much of this echoed the preoccupations of many pre-war film theorists that had been dismissed, ignored or forgotten in the intervening years. Other choices come across at first as rather more unexpected, such as Yuriko Furuhashi's consideration of architecture as a medium. Yet her chapter provides what is surely the finest possible example of a literal media ecology, of media forming a ubiquitous environment – considering Tokyo's media-saturated cityscape with its multitude of gaudy advertisements and giant video screens blaring and flinging messages into the urban atmosphere. Her consideration of architect Tange Kenzo's theories from the 1960s provide the necessary historical framework for something that has come to represent a popular techno-orientalist image of a hyper-urbanized, hyper-saturated future through such films as Ridley Scott's 1982 sci-fi classic *Blade Runner*. While this image needs to be seen in some degree of perspective – so much of Tokyo is a sprawl of bland cookie-cutter functionalism, with the media saturation mostly concentrated in the urban centres surrounding such major railway hubs as Shibuya, Shinjuku and Ikebukuro – its hold on the popular imagination across cultural borders is undeniable.

Quite a number of contributors to this volume shine a light on past theorists and on the journals and other avenues through which they published, thus providing a roadmap that connects previously unconnected (and many cases unknown) dots, while also offering anchoring points from which future scholarship can begin charting further areas and topics. A fine example is Zahlten's chapter on the wave of 'New Academism', which during the 1980s saw unparalleled commercial success and popular media exposure for such theorists as Asada Akira, Nakazawa Shinichi, Yomota Inuhiko and Ueno Chizuko. Though on occasion, people, discourses, or practices under review tend rather too much toward the insular, especially in terms of their pertinence for anyone not already firmly and profoundly engaged with the study of the Japanese media landscape, as is the case with Ryoko Misono's chapter on television critic Nancy Seki.

Other contributors cover what may seem at first like familiar ground, yet delve deeper to

adjust an all too limited popular image, such as in Takeshi Kadobayashi's essay on Azuma Hiroki, primarily known internationally as the man who theorised the otaku figure in his influential *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (Kodansha gendai shinsho, 2001). Kadobayashi charts Azuma's career and thematic fixations well beyond his most famous work, charting what he suggests is an ongoing process to shift emphasis from media theory to media strategy. Steinberg explores how Marshall McLuhan's theories were adopted and assimilated to fit an existing need in the Japanese advertising industry, in a way that suited the local situation rather than necessarily remaining true to intended meanings. Tomiko Yoda too looks at advertising, specifically its role in the creation of a consumer demographic that had previously been ignored, and its disposable time and income left untapped: single young women. In the same breath she also charts the shaping of Tokyo's Shibuya district into the consumer-driven, media-saturated cityscape noted earlier.

Media Theory in Japan is divided into three sections, though the choice for which essay fits which section occasionally comes across as somewhat arbitrary: the chapter on Azuma Hiroki, for example, is found under 'Communication Technologies' alongside the essays on television and architecture, rather than under one of the more appropriate-sounding sections 'Practical Theory' and 'Mediation and Media Theory'. Also, given co-editor Zahlten's familiarity with the topic (as he demonstrated in *The End of Japanese Cinema*, an investigation into home video could have lent the 'Communication Technologies' section a more robust profile. The global impact of the VCR, which was developed by Sony and JVC, and our almost complete lack of knowledge of Japanese theoretical writing on the topic certainly form enough reason for its inclusion in a collection of this kind. The editors even mention in their introduction how the popular success of the VCR contributed to a boom in 'new media' discourse during the 1980s, but the medium is conspicuous for its absence from all subsequent pages, index included.

But these are minor quibbles (admittedly from someone who makes video his own field of research), since this is an otherwise rigorously conceived and realised tome that provides solid foundations for future research in a wealth of disciplines, not limited to media studies and Japanology, but also notably for the social sciences.

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