

Re-imagining the Sinophone Prisonscape: a Transcultural Approach

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Abstract

There is no other space like the space of prison. And there is no understanding of prison without understanding its heterotopical architecture (Foucault) and the infinite possible imaginations of that architecture. Given the particular nature of prison as a globally shared experience and its universal existence as an institution (though with different and specific articulations), a transcultural approach is particularly appropriate (and perhaps the only possible one) in understanding the ways in which such experience is re-elaborated, manipulated, remembered, or imagined.

Prison writers have characterized the space of prison in many different ways: to Liao Yiwu 廖亦武 it is “the warehouse of the living dead” , to Xiaoda Xiao it is a “stone womb” instead. Wang Ruowang 王若望 imagines it like a “satellite” , and Shi Mingzheng 施明正 describes it as a “gigantic stone roller”. Literary texts evoke a new cartography of prison; they open up the iron gates to finally reveal a de-territorialized space (Davies), where the usual categories of inside-outside, right-wrong, good-evil are no longer sufficient to understand it.

Prison writings allow us to look into the ways in which personal experiences are remembered and how these relate to re-elaborations of shared historical traumas, such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Cultural Revolution, or the Tian’anmen crackdown in the People’s Republic and the period of the White Terror in Taiwan.

Taking prison narratives from and about the Sinophone world as a starting point, this paper discusses the possibility of a more inclusive, transcultural model aimed at exploring the representations of prison worlds, that I have termed the prisonscape.

Inspired by Arjun Appadurai’s theories on global interactions and Edward Soja’s notion of thirdspace, this conceptual approach seeks to explore and analyze the various ways in which prison is re-mapped, made tangible as an “imagined world”, and communicated through literature.