

Examples and poetics of wordplay in Han Shaogong's language-reflexive novel "A Dictionary of Maqiao"

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Language, its elements and its uses can be regarded as central subjects in Han Shaogong's novel "A Dictionary of Maqiao", first published in Chinese 1996, translated into English in 2003. (My comments will be based on the [authorized] English version.) The novel is composed as a dictionary: In more than 100 articles it describes the Southern Chinese village Maqiao, its history, its inhabitants, its vocabulary and its practices of using and understanding language – the plot being situated in the historical framework of Chinese history during and after the Cultural Revolution. In the form of stories told about the people of Maqiao, Han's narrator (who is the author's alter ego) both reflects about words, language and verbal performances in general and about the specific conditions in the rural world of Maqiao, as they are viewed from the perspective of the observer, a so-called 'educated youth' from the city. Playing with words is reflected as one linguistic practice among others, however, as a programmatic one. In the novel's context it occasionally characterizes either the playing characters themselves (as, for instance, in the case of a Daoist outsider who rejects to adapt to communist ideology and to integrate himself into the village worker's community, and who in spite of his poor appearance turns out to be a man of refined literary education) or the reality to which the wordplay implicitly refers (as, for instance, the practices of ideological cadre talk according to established speaking rules and based on a codified vocabulary). – Han's novel altogether opts for individuality, plurality and the right of being different – against generalisation and standardisation with regard to language as well as in a profoundly political sense. It thus develops a thoroughly affirmative view on strategies of linguistic deviation and inventiveness, as they are exemplarily characteristic of wordplay – especially on the level of performing language publicly.