

# Standing at theoretical cross-roads : Western literary theories in China

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## STANDING AT THEORETICAL CROSS-ROADS: WESTERN LITERARY THEORIES IN CHINA

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Since the policies of reform and openness were initiated in the 1980s a great number of Western theories have flooded into China. Yet, these theories have not been randomly or accidentally imported with no relation to local context. On the contrary, the successful introduction of any one theory has been dependent on a process of sifting and selection based on Chinese social reality and cultural context. Looking back on all the Western theories that have been introduced into China in the past decade or so, we may in general way, see their characteristics in the following few aspects.

First, during the past ten years or so, in a spirit of reaction to Soviet literary theories which stressed only social environment and social effect advocates of American New Literary Criticism have attracted wide interest through their use of "Affective Fallacy" and "Intentional Fallacy", concepts which sever the relationship between the original text and society by giving priority to the reader and the author. By refuting common analysis based on such things as historical background and typical characters the interpretative close reading method of the New Literary Criticism school has provided a new route to understanding literary works. For the same sorts of reasons, structuralism, especially structural narrativism, functions in a similar way from another perspective. This approach replaces monotonous social analysis of original text with such abstract concepts as narrative structure, narrator, and narrataire. Acceptance of structuralism in the field of literary criticism has been limited, however. The use of Binary Opposition or other such models to analyse Chinese literary works, which was once extremely popular in Taiwan, has been frequently criticised by mainland Chinese scholars as "cutting one's foot to fit a shoe."

Second, the propagation of Marxism in China may be dated back to the beginning of the century. Since the 1980s, though a number of critics stuck with the old Soviet-style literary theories more critics engaged in an

1 This is the written version of a lecture delivered at the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of Zurich, in October 1993.

exploration of both the development of Marxism in the West over the past few decades and the possibility of a Marxist renewal in China. Among Chinese young scholars, the works of W. Benjamin, T.W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas had at one time drawn enormous interest. This kind of interest was brought to a climax in and around the time the Western Marxist, Frederic Jameson, came to Beijing University on a lecture tour. With a combination of both the most current European and American theories, he expounded on the Marxist concern for the relationship between base and superstructure from many new perspectives. This had a very big impact on young scholars from different universities in Beijing, especially on the then graduate students who later became the backbone of theoretical work in the 1990s. Titled "Post modernism and Literary Theories", his lecture notes were translated into Chinese and published. The book was not only extremely popular on mainland China, it was also reprinted and circulated in Taiwan.

Third, some new Western concepts are barely mentioned, much less systematically treated in the Chinese literary tradition. These new theories have opened new areas in Chinese contemporary literary criticism and have been a hot subject of new fashionable interest. For instance, one outstanding example is Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. One can say that this theory was the most translated, was the most published and was the hottest theoretical topic in the field of literature during the 1980s. Chinese traditional literary theory seldom touches on psychological analyses and analysis related to sex and the subconscious is even more unheard of. Freud's theory did have some impact on literary creations after it was first introduced to China during the early 1930s. One example is the novels of the neo-perceptionists (*xin ganjue pai*). However, due to the war and ideological reasons, its influence was soon obliterated. Yet, literary creations and literary analysis carried out under the influence of Freud's theories were noteworthy during the 1980s. An even newer phenomenon in China is feminist literary criticism. Early in the 1980s the Henan Publishing Company began the publication of a comprehensive women's studies series (projected 25 volumes). Though the editor claims that this series is completely Chinese, it is not difficult to see the heavy influence of Western feminism. A good example is "Floating above the Surface of History", a book reflective of the highest quality that the series has to offer. The main content of this book, which was obviously inspired by French feminism in

many respects, is a summarisation of the work of female writers from 1917 to 1949. During this period, a large number of feminist theories and literary works were introduced to China. Among these works, the translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* caused quite a sensation at the time.

Fourth, the reason why some other Western theories attracted attention in China was due to the ease with which it was possible to find in them common ground with certain traditional Chinese literary concepts, and thus quickly obtain broad understanding and sympathy. Hermeneutics is one example. Ever since ancient times, China was a country in which a lot of attention was given to the commentaries and annotations of its classics. The major portion of Chinese learning was obtained through the study of classical exegesis. Even Confucius did not claim to have contributed anything new, but only to have recounted and annotated the learning of those who had come before him ("I am", he said, "a recorder, not a creator."). Throughout the development of Chinese culture over the past thousand years, there has been both a tradition of: "We explain the Six Classics", and a tradition of "the Six Classics explain us". The former stresses the explanation given by forefathers while the latter emphasises taking one's own point of view as a criteria and explaining one's thoughts through the quoting of classics. There also long has been in Chinese learning, expressions such as "induce the fundamentals through the investigation of particulars" (from understanding the specific to understanding the general) and "explore the fundamentals to obtain the particular" (from understanding the situation as a whole to understanding the details). These arguments can relatively easily be linked up with concepts like "Hermeneutic Circle" and "Hermeneutic Convention" in Western hermeneutics. There is also common ground shared by Western reception and traditional Chinese aesthetics in the emphasis both give to the relativity of and multiple perspectives of aesthetic appreciation and in their emphasis on the subjective understanding of the reader based on personal experience. There is a Chinese expression: "The difference between a mountain and a hill is in the perspective of the viewer." Another Chinese expression goes: "An author writes with one meaning, while each reader understands it in his or her own way" (*jiang zhai shi hua*). These both share a basic standpoint with Western reception aesthetics. And it is because of these shared features that Western hermeneutics and Western reception aesthetics were rarely opposed or resisted.

Finally, another important phenomenon in the field of literary research during the 1980s should be noted. That is the rapid rise of comparative literature. Due to the new and open perspective, theorists were anxious to measure Chinese literature in the context of a more extensive world setting. The relationship between Chinese and foreign literature very soon became a topic in which everyone was concerned. At the same time the introduction of a great number of Western theories made it possible for people, by consulting many different theoretical systems, to more deeply understand the characteristics of Chinese literary theories. This reflects the two pillars of comparative literature research, the study of influence and the study of parallels.

It was because of the above mentioned different theoretical challenges and reflections that the subject of "rewriting literary history" was brought up at the end of the 1980s. This caused heated discussion in Beijing and Shanghai.

For obvious reasons known to everyone, an important turning point occurred in the field of literary theories in 1989. Quite a few publications and publishing houses were shut down or their leaderships were replaced. Heated discussion was stopped abruptly and although few people opted to actively participate in the process, the idea of rewriting literary history was criticised and suppressed. This kind of temporary stillness in the literary field provided an opportunity for deep and sober reflection, and also changed the direction of people's thinking to a certain extent.

The concept of deconstruction began to prevail, especially among those who grew up during the Cultural Revolution. This generation, as a wise member of them aptly concluded, is the generation that went "from genuinely believing everything to genuinely disbelieving everything". It was just to their tastes to go from determinism to indeterminism, to go from a method of one-track reasoning characterised by unitary authorities, sole criteria and single answers to a multi-perspective thinking characterised by its plurality, its decentralisation and its variety. Some taken-for-granted principles which were never previously doubted were questioned and challenged, such as the absolute accordant relationship between appearance and essence, the inevitable and the accidental, the indicator and the indicated. After the works of Douwe Fokkema, Ihab Hassan, Jean François Lyotard were translated, post modernism not only became a hot



topic in the field of literary criticism, it also had an impact on the field of literary creation, resulting in the emergence of a group of avant-garde writers such as Yu Hua, Ge Fei and Su Tong whose mode of thinking was close to post modernism. When the concept of post modernism was proposed, it brought about debates and reproached from different fields. Some people boldly and assuredly argued that China is only at the beginning stage of its modernisation, and therefore, it is too early to talk about post modernism. However, many others believed that post modernism is just a varied means to explain chaotic reality. They maintained that it should not be considered strange but rather only natural that this means was adopted by literary theorists, given the disintegration and chaos of ideology in China during the past few decades, and especially after the absurdity of the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, because of the omnidirectional linkages of modern telecommunication networks, the world is already very much one interconnected unit, thus the argument that the superstructure of a certain area is solely determined by the economic basis of that area is no longer acceptable.

If the above-mentioned theories of deconstruction and post modernism brings to mind the age-old traditional school of Zhuangzi, with its relativity scepticism, detachment, and frivolity, then the enthusiasm for the re-exploration of native Chinese civilisation, which occurred at about the same time, in some ways bears strong resemblance to the Confucian school, which was concerned with "maximising its utility to the nation". As a result of the 1989 experience, those in this latter camp concluded that the maintenance of stability is essential to the development of a strong and prosperous country and that all else may be sacrificed to this end including justice, fairness and humanism. Moreover, it was held that many Western concepts such as freedom and democracy may not necessarily be beneficial to China. They believe that the empowerment of the Chinese must again be sought in the cultural essence of China, which has been distilled by the forces of several thousands of years of history.

This quite powerful ideological trend, to a certain extent, has gained the support of the government which is anxious to stabilise social order. However, looking at it from another perspective, one can also say that with its reference to a pre-Marxist original China, there is embodied in this ideological trend an undercurrent which runs in opposition to the decades long dominant theoretical position of Marxism, as Marxism is itself a pro-

duct of the West and thus foreign. This hot trend of “seeking native culture” soon joined forces with the Western “New History” which was popular just at the time. New History holds that history is just like literature, in that it is also a kind of text the interpretation of which is inevitably restricted by the perspectives of the historian, the understanding of the reader, and the social background at the time. The “native civilisation” which is the object of this search can not possibly have the unitary logic and unchanging character of a “things become”, on the contrary, it is a constantly changing “things becoming”, subject to a multiplicity of interpretations. Thus, the search for a native civilisation is after all a reconstruction of the native civilisation by contemporary people from a contemporary perspective.

Of course, it is impossible for the contemporary people to possess a purely native Chinese perspective, as a new comprehensive field of vision has been formed which incorporates world-wide knowledge and information. New History stresses that an ideological superstructure is not solely restricted by the contemporary local economic base, as it simultaneously also engages in the formation of that economic base. *New History and Literary Criticism*, a book edited and translated by the Comparative Literature Research Institute of Beijing University, contains articles by Stephen Greenblatt, Hayden White, Brook Thomas et al., which all once inspired peoples serious reflection.

Post-colonialism, which rose at the end of the 80s, stresses that all different cultures possess their own rationality. This school believes that “cultural clusters” founded on the basis of race, common language, and shared history possess a special cultural cohesive force and a cultural identity which is formed from it. Proponents of this school unanimously stress that there is a set of cultural conventions which are commonly recognised within each cultural cluster. *Orientalism*, written by Edward Said, proposed that under the conditions of colonisation, this kind of cultural identity based on cultural conventions was long distorted by European centrality. Lacking power, the colonised possess no statement and no discourse of their own, and so they can only be explained by others (the colonisers). They thus have no choice but to establish their identity (cultural identity) in terms of the discourse and culture of their colonisers. It is therefore necessary for the Third World to break away from the West, in order to rediscover everything that is theirs.

These two kinds of ideological trends vigorously aroused the interest of the mainland Chinese academia in the 1990s to re-explore traditional Chinese culture. To be sure, it is not difficult to find a latent "great China complex" in all this, it is as if having replaced European centrality the development of a "great China centrality" is inevitable. In their opinion, Chinese culture is better than all others, it can cultivate all kinds modern ideology, and can provide the key to all contemporary problems. They believe that in order to revive Chinese culture, it is necessary to expel all Western terminology, concepts and modes of thinking because these are all expressions of Western discourse and thus are all spiritual fetters imposed on the Third World by its colonisers. It must be said that the emergence of this kind of trend is a dangerous sign. The result of this can only be a new form of isolation or cultural subjugation.

Recently (August 20-26, 1993), the "Daily Reference News" (*Cankao xiaoxi*), an "internally distributed" paper published by the New China News Agency, printed in serial fashion over a period of seven days an article by an American Harvard University professor entitled "A New Theory of Cultural Conflicts". This official newspaper has in the past, for the most part, only serialised articles related to "restricted news" and accounts of espionage. I believe it is very likely that the reason that tradition was broken with, in this case, and such a long academic treatise was serialised is that some of the shocking arguments of this professor stimulated the latent "great China complex" thinking of certain people. This professor claims that in the future humanity will see a "great confrontation between the West and the non-West," that this will take the form of an "ethnic war between people of culturally homogenous nations and other nations and people" and that it will "eventually be elevated to a world war". He even declared that, "the focal point of confrontation will be located in disputes erupting between Western nations and Confucian and Muslim countries which disdain to be westernised."

I think it is very possible that it is due to just these kinds of statements that certain people have become overly anxious about gathering and strengthening their own cultural power, so that they may be able to confront the West and eventually be able to meet the challenges of a world war! This kind of vigilance in and of itself can not be censured, one can not allow oneself to be seized without putting up a fight. But I believe the argument of this professor deserves to be questioned. One cannot attribute



to culture all such extremely complicated factors such as politics, economics and happenstance. The reason behind the world's most intense armed conflict between Iraq and Kuwait were not, after all, chiefly cultural.

More importantly, humanity naturally shares many common aspects, just one example is the fact that as Lévi-Strauss has said, "Human brains no matter where they are from, all share a common structure and more over ... all share common functions." (*Myth and Meaning*). All humanity invariably shares some common needs, for example, the need for warmth and sustenance, the need for peace and safety, the need for personal development and improvement etc. Clusters of convention universally recognised within a cultural cluster are most often extraordinarily narrow and limited. Beyond these conventions, any given individual within one cluster may on the contrary share more areas of commonalty with individuals of another culture cluster. For example, I suspect an eighteen year old Chinese youth of today shares vastly more in common with a westerner of the same age than he or she shares in common with a Chinese youth of the eighteenth century.

Intentionally ignoring the commonalty of different cultures, wilfully exaggerating their differences, provoking Western and non-Western oppositions is a very dangerous thing to do. Nowadays the various peoples of the world are making efforts to re-examine their own cultures from a contemporary perspective. This kind of perspective, by its nature, unavoidably contains many universal elements that are mutually shared and commonly existent. The purpose of this re-examination of one's own culture no doubt lies in the search for empowerment of one's own people, and the re-establishment of the cultural identity of one's own people. While in other respects, and perhaps more importantly, it is the intellectual re-excavation of the special characteristics of one's people and the sorting out of the riches of one's traditional culture in order to gain the understanding and mutual appreciation of the other peoples of the world. In this way, it is possible to facilitate the adding of another special and harmonious musical part to the pluralistic chorus of future cultural development.

Literature, as a component of culture, must obtain new annotations and understanding through the relating of various ancient and modern, foreign and Chinese cultural elements. It must take on the important of advancing the mutual understanding between disparate cultural groups in order to be of benefit to humanity. This is commonly recognised by many lit-

erary critics and it is the predominant trend of literary studies of the 1990s. However, on the other hand, there is another major undercurrent represented by deconstructionist and post modernist trends of thought which strive to maintain a clear distance between literature and social utility, which seeks the marginalisation, fragmentation, the purposelessness and frivolity of literature, and uninterruptedly eschew the above mentioned grand theory of human science. In conclusion, whether one considers humanism or deconstructionist theories, it is possible to see the influence which was brought about by the introduction of Western literary theories. These two trends of thought are also the continuation of the debate in the field of Chinese literature regarding "Art for Art's sake" and "Art for Life's sake" which has been going on since early in this century. On an even deeper level they are a new manifestation of the divergence in approach between the Confucian and Daoist schools. The former, which advocates "universal peace through proper government administration" and the latter, which advocates "carefreeness of natural spontaneity".

Literary theories are still at cross-roads.

