

Outside the Gurus' Sandboxes: Reconsidering Common Assumptions in the Contemporary Study of Modern Chinese Literature

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ABSTRACT

The North American deconstructor J. Hillis Miller has revealed his impatience and lack of familiarity with Chinese literary studies in the West by remarking that Stephen Owen is virtually the only Western specialist in Chinese literature "who also knows something about Western literary theory and comparative literature." The others whom Miller met at Yale and elsewhere were supposedly just creating "a mystique about how much they knew."

The four contributors to this special issue of *Tamkang Review* acknowledge the existence of ossified thinking and intellectual mystification in various corners of Western academe. In general, however, we find less of it in Chinese literary studies than in various North American departments of Western literature and cultural studies such as Miller's, which have been busily exporting poststructuralist and postmodernist theories to any department that will take it. Because poststructuralists like Miller typically congratulate themselves for having taking "the linguistic turn"—and yet write as if entirely unaware of the advances in the philosophy of language since Wittgenstein—the prominent narrative theorist Robert Storey has justifiably compared their activity to "paddling about in intellectual sandboxes."

KEY WORDS

Structuralism

intellectual mystification

postcolonialism

mimetic heresy

poststructuralism

Cultural Studies

reading preferences

postmodernism



Various elite academics in Western literary studies have lately penned some rather harsh and over-generalized criticisms of recent scholarship in Chinese literary studies. The Duke Marxist critic Fredric Jameson insists that scholars in Chinese literature from the PRC will necessarily achieve ascendancy in the field, not because of the excellent training in that giant nation's universities, but because their colleagues from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the West are burdened by the "weight of tradition (including the Chinese classics fully as much as the pre-structuralist or 'pre-theoretical' Western literary ones)." Jameson here erroneously claims that the storehouse of achievements in Chinese literary studies and Sinology that are neither structuralist nor poststructuralist in orientation—which actually includes much work done in the PRC as well as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the West—is merely a burden to be laid down and walked away from, rather than a foundation for future research (Jameson 5). Another North American professor in a department of English, the deconstructor J. Hillis Miller, has opined that Stephen Owen was virtually the only Western specialist in Chinese literature "who also knows something about Western literary theory and comparative literature"; the others whom Miller met were supposedly just creating "a mystique about how much they knew" (Li Minru 416).

The contributors to this special issue of the *Tamkang Review* acknowledge the existence of ossified thinking and intellectual mystification in various corners of Western academe. However, we find considerably less of it in Chinese literary studies than in various North American departments of Western literature and cultural studies, such as the ones where Jameson and Miller teach. To the extent

that rigid ideological frameworks and poorly substantiated hypotheses have recently become more prevalent in Chinese literary studies, this is largely the result of uncritical borrowings of poststructuralist and postmodernist theories from those very same North American departments of Western literature. Insofar as literary poststructuralists typically congratulate themselves for having taking “the linguistic turn” and yet write as if entirely unaware of the advances in the philosophy of language since Wittgenstein (Searle 1994), a prominent drama critic has justifiably compared their activity to “paddling about in intellectual sandboxes” (Storey 207).

Michael S. Duke bases his critique of postmodernist Western literary theory on an astonishingly broad array of contrarian theoretical and historical works that postmodernists usually dismiss or blithely pass over in silence. After perusing Duke’s clear and solidly researched presentation, readers will have good reason to question the intellectual diligence and credentials of Foucauldians who have not heard of José Guilherme Merquior, Lacanians and Freudians who dismiss Frederick Crews, Derridean deconstructors who can’t be bothered to read John M. Ellis, and Saidian anti-orientalists who know nothing of John M. MacKenzie.

On the basis of close readings of Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman” and Mo Yan’s *Boozeland*, Yenna Wu explores a large variety of pitfalls in applying the postcolonialist conceptual framework to Chinese literary studies. Wu convincingly demonstrates that postcolonialist theory cannot be casually applied to China—nor can it take the place of careful scrutiny of both the mimetic dimension and historical contexts of these works of fiction.

Inge Nielsen’s analysis of an unprecedentedly detailed 1998 survey of Beijing residents’ reading preferences contains many surprising findings. Nielsen indicates the alarming degree to which the academic field of modern Chinese literature studies, with its increasing attraction to “postist” interpretive approaches, has become detached from what is actually taking place in contemporary Chinese literary culture.

Philip Williams summarizes various achievements in the field of

modern Chinese literary studies in the West before turning to some major deficiencies that need attention. The mimetic heresy that has grown in the wake of poststructuralism's increasing influence on the field points to a larger problem: the tendency to accept the positions of a Western academic literary guru like Jameson or Said largely on faith, instead of subjecting even the most talked-about academic hypotheses to critical scholarly scrutiny.

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