Changing Trends: Some Methodological Issues in the Study of Chinese Vernacular Fiction at American Universities

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ABSTRACT

Whether and how one should apply Western literary theory in analyses of Chinese fiction has been a major debate among sinologists in the West. I argue for the validity of adopting a universal historical perspective and judiciously employing Western literary theory to analyze Chinese works, while taking cultural specificity into consideration. Warning about poststructuralist theory, I show how its pretensions have been exposed by recent critics. I suggest that the criteria for choosing theories should be that they are sound and testable, they focus on illuminating the literary work, and they can be effectively utilized in the analysis of Chinese texts. Three theoretical approaches are suggested for critics in sinology and Sino-Western comparative studies. Recommending inductive reasoning as well as carefully tailored approaches suited to a given context, I propose consciously adhering to a methodology based on critical analysis and evidential research.

KEY WORDS

suoyin pai (索隱派)
kaozheng pai (考證派)
universalism
relativism
transcultural understanding
realism
temporal
spatial
poetics of Chinese fiction
Sino-Western comparative studies
humanism
poststructuralism
cross-cultural genre studies
evolutionary theory

How to read pre-modern Chinese vernacular fiction has been continuously debated by scholars in the West. In describing "the state of the field," Robert E. Hegel identified three basic "schools" of critical studies: the *suoyin pai* (索隱派) or "Allegorists" who read fiction as *roman à clef*, "searching primarily for predetermined relationships between the contents of a work of fiction and the immediate social, political, and economic context in which it was produced"; the *kaozheng pai* (考證派) or "the school of textual criticism and historical research," including source and biographical studies; and the school which uses "the tools of Western literary criticism" to analyze Chinese fiction, usually "focusing on the texts rather than their contexts," as does C. T. Hsia, one of its most notable practitioners (Hegel 1994, 403-406).[1] The *suoyin* method, though useful during some specific historical moments in China, has become somewhat outdated and fallen out of favor now. While still regarded as a viable approach by some Chinese scholars, it is rarely adopted by sinologists in the West. Thus, sinologists in the West fall mostly into the latter two categories. While they debate topics ranging from the interpretation of the term *xiaoshuo* ("fiction," literally, "small talk") to the origins of Chinese "fiction,"[2] their greatest debate has been whether and how one should apply Western literary theory in analyses of Chinese fiction.

For the sake of convenience, I divide scholars involved in this particular controversy during the last thirty years into two groups, departing somewhat from Hegel's three-part classification. (But as I will argue later, some scholars are eclectic enough to defy labeling.) The first group considers Chinese fiction in the context of world literature, employing Western literary theory to analyze—and even evaluate—Chinese works. The second group rejects the applicability of Western theories for the study of Chinese fiction, arguing that

since Chinese fiction emerges from an entirely different cultural tradition, it must be studied on its own terms. While conscious of Western literary traditions, a contingent of the second group turns to Chinese cosmology and fiction criticism in search of the particular characteristics that distinguish Chinese fiction from its Western counterparts. With the exception of W. L. Idema, a professor at Sinologisch Instituut in Leiden, all the scholars I mention in this paper work in the U. S. academe. After discussing the debates between these two groups as well as the problem of literary hermeneutics, I will critique some of the Sino-Western comparatists' viewpoints, and conclude by offering suggestions for future directions.

It is both natural and fortunate that such pioneers as C. T. Hsia and Patrick Hanan should use Western literary terms and concepts to analyze and introduce Chinese fiction to the West. Having the advantage of being well-read in both Chinese and Western literatures, these pioneers employ both traditional Chinese textual study and Western interpretive strategies. Aware that all fictional works share certain basic elements and thus are in some ways "universal," these critics treat Chinese fiction as part of world literature. By using familiar Western literary concepts, they make Chinese fiction accessible and understandable to the Western reader, rather than exceedingly arcane and exotic. Moreover, they offer much insight into Chinese fiction through a selective and judicious use of Western critical theories and "close readings" of Chinese literary works. While adopting "formalist" and New Critical approaches, they also include some of the more traditionally Chinese approaches such as the historical, biographical, and aesthetic.[3] Thus, despite some negative critiques, Hsia's *Classic Chinese Novel* (1968) remains by all measures an indispensable classic. Hanan's *Chinese Vernacular Story* (1981) is an important milestone as well.

However, numerous problems arise when critics with a very different agenda from either Hsia or Hanan judge Chinese fiction *exclusively* according to the standards of Western aesthetics. In an essay published in 1956 to warn the reader about what not to expect in Chinese fiction, John Bishop candidly deplores its lack of origi-

realism, as a classification of genre used by Hanan to distinguish vernacular stories from classical tales, can be a useful category, enhancing our understanding of the vernacular stories by highlighting certain characteristic features.

I would also argue that it is quite legitimate to use the notion of realism in analyzing Chinese fiction as long as realism is broadly defined. Harry Levin has defined it as the "willed tendency of art to approximate reality."[9] But Raymond Tallis, in his *In Defence of Realism* (1988), has found it preferable to delineate what does not constitute realism by pointing out two of its most important boundaries as "those which divide it off from (a) fantasy and (b) word games" (Tallis 1988, 190-191). Tallis also notes that the boundary between realism and fantasy changes over time. Although plausibility is "a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of realism," what is plausible varies from epoch to epoch (Tallis 1988, 193, 208, 210)—and, I would contend, from culture to culture. Moreover, as Tallis insightfully observes, there is a constant tension between the novelist's desire to "give definitive expression to a piece of reality" and the desire to "advance the business of his novel" and "impose an aesthetic order upon it" (Tallis 1988, 200-202).

Gauged according to Raymond Tallis' criteria, many Chinese stories and novels do fall under the category of realism. While it is true that Chinese novelists often favor advancing the business of their novels over expressing factual reality, this should neither lead us to ignore their explorations of individual psychology and (in Wong's terms) "particular truths," nor to dismiss these works as entirely lacking in realism.

Consider, for example, the famous story "The Pearl Shirt Reencountered" ("Jiang Xingge chonghui zhenzhu shan" 蔣興哥重會珍珠衫) which Timothy C. Wong singles out for analysis and which is also among the group discussed by W. L. Idema.[10] First, it is obviously neither word games nor fantasy. Second, from a Western point of view, the plot may appear somewhat implausible and the coincidence resulting from heavenly retribution seems to indicate the existence of "supernatural" elements. However, when considered

from the traditional Chinese perspective, the plot is plausible and the "supernatural" elements, if any, are regarded as natural within the context of the story.

This story may appear "implausible" because it ends in the adulterer's death and his wife's marrying the man he had cuckolded.[11] The divine retribution revealed through this plot design may seem "supernatural." But the author has provided clues and causes earlier in the text for such an ending to be both plausible and "natural." For example, because the author has explained earlier in the story why the protagonist Jiang Xingge usually travels under an assumed name, we do not find it implausible that the adulterous traveling merchant Chen Dalang (陳大郎) should confide in Jiang (who uses Luo 羅 as a surname) about his love affair with Sanqiao (三巧)—Jiang's wife—when he meets, and becomes fast friends with, Jiang during his trading trip; and because the author has already portrayed Madame Ping (平), Chen Dalang's wife, as beautiful, sensible, and faithful, we do not find it "supernatural" that Jiang should marry her later—she goes to Jiang's hometown in order to give her husband Chen Dalang a proper burial, but is then stranded in town, penniless, while Jiang happens to be looking for a wife who is both beautiful and sensible.

Also in reaction to the application of Western theory to the study of Chinese fiction, a group of scholars have turned to traditional Chinese philosophy, aesthetics, and fiction commentaries for explanations of the characteristics of Chinese fiction. Though using Western literary terminology, scholars such as Andrew H. Plaks and Shuen-fu Lin have tried to explain the difference between Chinese and Western fiction as a result of the Chinese world view, which they perceive to be diametrically opposed to the Western Weltanschauung.[12] Examining the traditional concepts of *yinyang* and *wuxing* and explaining their workings with the terms of "complementary bipolarity" and "multiple periodicity," Andrew H. Plaks contends that—in contrast to the Western narrative model based on the temporal form of myth—the Chinese narrative model is built on the spatial form of ritual, and the Chinese writer transcends time, positing a

"spatial vision of totality" (Plaks 1976, 6-8). Shuen-fu Lin, adopting the views of Joseph Needham and Frederick W. Mote, argues that because the Chinese world view differs from the Western, the Chinese novels are structured differently: Western thought emphasizes causality and chronology and thus Western novels have a linear, "temporal" structure; the Chinese view the universe in a "synchronistic" way, as an organism without a creator, and thus Chinese novels have a non-causal, spatial, and episodic structure (Lin 244-265). It should be noted in passing that in the field of Chinese philosophy, a newer version of the dichotomy of Western versus Chinese world views is the contrast between Western "dualism" and Chinese "polarism," in the terms of David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames (Hall and Ames 1987, 17-21; Ames 1993, 158-163).[13] According to this paradigm, diametric opposition itself is "Western." One wonders how meaningful and useful such a dubious theoretical framework can be in practice.

Among this subgroup of scholars, David T. Roy also worried about imposing Western critical concepts on Chinese novels—"works that are the product of an alien tradition," as he called them (Roy 1977, 115). Spurred by such concerns, a number of scholars researched into the poetics of traditional Chinese fiction and made significant contributions to criticism. The research culminated in the landmark achievement, *How to Read the Chinese Novel* (1990), edited by David L. Rolston. This book is helpful to criticism of the Chinese narrative within cultural contexts and greatly enhances our understanding of Chinese fiction. It also offers the primary sources needed to construct a Sino-Western comparative poetics of the novel.

However, difficulties arise if the "back-to-tradition" position is taken too far. While such cosmological views as cyclical changes, *yinyang*, and five-phase correspondences (*wuxing*) are useful in analyzing and appreciating the characteristics of Chinese fiction, the Chinese mind and Chinese fiction are in fact not so sharply divergent from the Western mind and fiction as these critics make them out to be. The difference is rather a matter of degrees. The Chinese may emphasize cyclical changes more than the Westerners, but the West

also has such concepts. By the same token, the Western mind may appear more dualistic or dialectical than the Chinese mind, but it would be a mistake to describe the Chinese mind as monistic.

Over-generalizations of "East" versus "West" tend to be simplistic and should be avoided. Current Sino-Western comparative studies have gone far beyond the stage in which such generalizations may have served some introductory function. What this field needs the most now are in-depth and nuanced analyses of specific topics, rather than reductive—even dubious—generalizations.

Moreover, such notions as "The Chinese mind" or "The Western mind" can mislead us into thinking there was a single, monolithic ideology that completely dominated all of the West (or all of China) for thousands of years. There are, of course, dominant tendencies in either tradition, but there are many exceptions as well. On the one hand, the ancient Chinese concept of the five agents or phases as well as the correspondence of them with five colors, five tones, and even dynastic cycles, may appear to have been a perennial belief. Yet it was challenged and criticized by such independent thinkers as Wang Chong (王充) (27-97?).[14] Though an "Easterner," Wang Chong considered many of the *yinyang wuxing* ideas to be practically worthless. On the other hand, medieval murals in the West, for example, depict within the same spatial framework events which actually occurred at different times; and even some of the earliest novels in England are not strictly chronological in their presentation of events.[15]

The degree to which Chinese cosmology affects the writing of Chinese fiction is also subject to debate. Despite preponderant attention to spatial structure, Chinese novels in fact also depend on temporal and causal factors in their narrative construction. The detective story—a narrative form that appears in both China and the West—is a good case in point. Although it is well known that the Chinese detective story differs from its Western counterpart in that it "usually reveals the identity of the criminal at the very beginning," there are exceptions in which the identity of the criminal is concealed from the detective as well as from the reader.[16] Moreover, the goal of discov-

ering the underlying motives, the circumstances, and the methods by which the crime has been committed is the same in both Chinese and Western versions. The detective story usually "begins" *after* a criminal act such as a murder or theft has been committed, and relies heavily on chronological and causal sequence in order to reconstruct the events leading up to the moment of the crime.

I would thus call for a more balanced view in characterizing Chinese cosmology and fiction-writing and in adopting traditional fiction commentaries. C. T. Hsia has rightly criticized Plaks' and Lin's attempts to particularize "the Chinese mind": "By thus invoking the peculiar Chinese mentality and world view, we can turn almost any seeming or real deficiency of the Chinese novel into a strength" (Hsia 1983, 175). Furthermore, even though Rolston's collection is praiseworthy, this scholarly approach—the (re)construction of a Chinese poetics—has not met with unanimous acclaim. While I do not share Hsia's criticism of David T. Roy and Andrew H. Plaks for turning to traditional commentators for guidance, I fully agree with Hsia's warning in 1983 that instead of privileging traditional commentaries, we need to use them with caution (Hsia 1983, 177-178).

It is useful at this point to raise the question of what reading is for as well as the multiple purposes of reading. The utility of fiction commentaries very much depends upon what one is doing with the literary work. If the question is to restore, for example, what a Ming novel meant to its Ming readers, then the commentary is indispensable. But if the question is how to make it intelligible to a modern reader with hardly any background training in traditional Chinese literature, then the commentary may not be essential. Moreover, even when they can serve important functions, the fiction commentaries from the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries represent primarily the responses from one level of audience—the elite class—and some of these express the rather idiosyncratic views of certain individual critics such as Jin Shengtan (金聖嘆, 1608-1661) and Zhang Zhupo (張竹坡, 1670-1698). Although in recent years Jin and Zhang tend to be revered as authorities in fiction commentary, they should first of

all be approached as readers who have blindness as well as insights, simple or deliberate misreading as well as what Harold Bloom suggests in *A Map of Misreading* as creative misprision. Thus, while allowing us to reconstruct "a poetics of the Chinese novel" (Plaks 1990, 84), the fiction criticism in *How to Read the Chinese Novel* should not be taken as "The Poetics" of the Chinese novel.

Despite their differences, both groups contribute much to Sino-Western comparative literature. The first group displays obvious comparative elements by employing Western critical standards and also by occasionally comparing Chinese works to their Western counterparts. Some sinologists among this group, such as Anthony C. Yu and H. C. Chang, are well trained comparatists. Even Andrew H. Plaks, whom I have placed in the second group for clarity of argument, is an expert comparatist. In *Archetype and Allegory in the Dream of the Red Chamber* (1976), for example, Plaks spends as much time placing Spenser in the context of Western mythology and philosophy as he does discussing Chinese myth and literature.

But to a younger generation of Sino-Western comparatists, the state of the sinological field appears woefully inadequate. In an attempt to historicize the development in the study of classical Chinese fiction from the 1970s to 1980s, Jing Wang argues for a "shift of emphasis from the historical to the formal/aesthetic" in Chinese literary studies since the mid-1970s (Wang 1992, 17). However, to view the field this way is to overlook the work during the past twenty years of such major critics as Hsia and Hanan. Hsia, for example, has continued to call, rightly and forcefully, for an approach to see the novel not purely as a literary object but also as related to "reality," life and society (Hsia 1983, 179-180). It is also misleading to use a single term to describe a critic's approach, since one might adopt different approaches either to different works or during different stages of a career.

"Psychoanalyzing" the sinologists who read literature within its sociohistorical contexts, Jing Wang would have us believe that they are "purists" obsessed with the "issue of legitimation" and "sinocentric worshipers" of an "authentic" past who, full of anxiety about

the alien, regard Western interpretive schemes as "a sacrilegious act," and who view literature as "the *unmediated* representation of historical reality" (Wang 1992, 4, 7, 11-12, 14, 17). Such simplistic generalizations fail to describe dominant critics such as Hsia, Hanan, Anthony C. Yu, Andrew H. Plaks, Robert E. Hegel, and Ellen Widmer who carefully employ Western interpretive strategies. Moreover, when Plaks suggests that the four great Ming novels be seen as "reflections of the cultural values and intellectual concerns of the sophisticated literary circles of the late Ming period,"[17] he does not mean a "mechanical" reflection of history, as Wang claims. Wang criticizes the "sino-structuralists" for turning to the classical Chinese commentary tradition as "an orthodox theoretical paradigm" (Wang 1992, 17). Although I warned earlier against overestimating the importance of elitist and/or idiosyncratic views, I believe that traditional fiction criticism, rather than being "orthodox," often allows an interpretation of these novels from a less distorted cultural perspective.

Wang's claim that both humanism and structuralism became "bygone landmarks" in literary studies in the 1980s is also erroneous and short-sighted (Wang 1992, 24). Humanism has not died, although it is true that poststructuralism, which was in full force over two and a half decades ago in France and has been ebbing there ever since, continues to exert influence among some faculty and graduate students in various North American literature departments.[18] Such perceptive critics as Frederick Crews (1986; 1993), Paisley Livingston (1988), Raymond Tallis *(Not Saussure,* 1988), John M. Ellis (1989), David Lehman (1991), Joseph Carroll (1995), and Robert Storey (1996), have penetrated and exposed the pretensions of the poststructuralist theory.

In reaction to the "Theoretical" and highly politicized Modern Language Association, many scholars from across the U.S. have formed a new association—Association of Literary Scholars and Critics—which aims to return to literature itself and to embrace humanistic interpretations. Most recently, the infamous Sokal hoax exposed how flimsy the ivory-tower of anti-empiricism and anti-

intellectualism in cultural studies has become.[19] The straightfaced acceptance of Sokal's essay by the editors of *Social Text* at Duke University is ironic, given their emphasis on the uncertainty and riness of language and their delight in the "playful" reading of texts.

Frank Lentricchia, formerly one of the leading figures in the anti-humanist trend, has recently confessed that during those years when he was writing grand literary theory "exposing" literature as a political instrument, he was secretly savoring the pleasure of reading literature on its own terms. Now he has given up writing, reading, and teaching theory, and turned instead to explore "the pleasure of reading" with undergraduates.[20] Lentricchia's changed stance is but one sign of the revival of humanism.

Jing Wang—along with a number of other young China scholars—jumped on the bandwagon of poststructuralism because they could not foresee a reversal of this trend. According to Philip F. Williams's incisive critique, departments of East Asian literature have recently "absorbed various inroads or 'interventions' from poststructuralist adepts." These adepts, whose seemingly radical theoretical stances amount to little more than futile oppositionalist posturing, deferentially grope after the "dramatic but logically inadequate 'nouvelle critique' doctrines couched in neologistic prose that is more performative than communicative" (Williams, 174, 176). As Michael Duke rightly laments, they "express themselves with a fuzziness and in jargon-like phrases such as 'intertextuality' and 'floating signifiers' that by their nature prevent others from understanding exactly what they mean." As a result, "[t] here is a kind of in-house quality to their discourse that makes their ideas accessible to only a small number in the West and perhaps not even a handful in China" (Duke 223).

The Western poststructuralist trend is far more obvious in the field of modern—as opposed to premodern—Chinese fiction. As Hegel notes, "'Deconstruction' of texts, with its essentially solipsistic bent, has rarely been applied to the study of traditional Chinese fiction" (Hegel 407). Indeed, the field of premodern Chinese fiction

has thus far been dominated by readings which either consider Chinese literature in the context of world literature or use recent sinologists' scholarship to place Chinese fiction in its sociohistorical context. Solid works emerging from university presses illustrate the continuing sociohistorical trend in criticism and scholarship.

However, poststructuralist analysis has been employed by a few recent critics of premodern Chinese literature, and as the current trend goes, will most likely be adopted by even more critics in the future. I would therefore like to issue some warnings. I warn not against the use of theory, but Theory, with a capital "t." In Paul de Man's deconstruction, for example, reasonable queries about the evidential substantiation of a given theory are commonly deflected with *non sequitur* formulations such as "resistance to theory" (de Man, 3-20). Such a theory is little more than an authority-laden pronouncement that brooks no substantive criticism in practice. Associated with this theory is the extreme nominalist linguistic position which holds that a word can refer only to other words and not—even indirectly—to anything outside of language. How can scholars espousing such a theory claim that research based upon these premises amounts to anything more than a sophistical performance—i.e., is "about" any extra-linguistic matter of substance?

Turning back to the sinological field, I believe that seasoned critics such as Hsia, Hanan, Plaks, and Yu choose not to apply the theories of Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Fredric Jameson, or Louis Althusser. I would emphasize that this is an active decision on their part, and not mere ignorance of the theories. Take, for example, Foucault's outrageous proclamations that man is dead (Foucault 1973, xxiii) and that the author is but a very recent invention and no more than "a function of discourse" (Foucault 1977, 113-138), as well as Barthes' pronouncement of the death of the author (Barthes 1972, 7-12). How can such "theories" have anything useful to contribute to the study of Chinese literature—a literary tradition in which the issues of authorship and commentary are so important and complex?

Realizing that the deconstructionist, poststructuralist, and postmodernist theories have little value for the study of traditional Chinese fiction, these critics draw instead on more useful theories such as New Critical, formalist, aesthetic, and socio-historical. Moreover, instead of self-reflexively emphasizing the performative and rhetorical aspects of literary criticism, they seek to communicate their scholarly explorations of literary works, extending the borders of knowledge and interpretation in the field and offering criticism that is practical and useful to sinologists and nonspecialists alike. For example, Hanan does not just adopt and apply Western theories indiscriminately; rather, he absorbs, modifies, and recreates selected Western theories in his analysis of Chinese fiction and communicates all this to his readers. He thus provides a comprehensive and succinct scheme of narrative analysis that can be used as an elegant instrument to examine Chinese fiction (Hanan 1981, 16-20).

While I object to "Theory" I would advocate pluralism as well as the judicious selection from a variety of theories as appropriate to context. The ability to accommodate differences of opinion is one of the Confucian virtues and can be found in writings as early as the fifth century B.C.[21] Mencius praised Confucius for his ability to take action appropriate to the circumstances.[22] Confronted with the tumultuous events resulting from threats to China from Japan and the West, the famous late-Qing writer Liu E (劉鶚) also invoked the Confucian ability to accommodate heterodoxy through the admiration expressed by a fictional character in his novel *The Travels of Laocan* (*Laocan youji*, 老殘遊記, 1906).[23]

The desire to accommodate was also expressed by Kathleen L. Komar, Professor of Comparative Literature at U.C.L.A., in her discussion of the split between poststructuralist criticism and cultural studies in the field of comparative literature. As Komar insightfully pointed out, "profitable appropriation" can be gained in a nonconfrontational scenario: "Comparative analysis allows for understanding and adaptation without necessitating elimination of opposing views or the absolute privileging of one theoretical position" (Komar 287-292) . Given the changing nature of the criticism indus-

try, it would be a perilous enterprise to make pronouncements about present trends or even prophesy the death of some theories. While empiricism and humanism will not die, the coming of the twenty-first century most likely will not sound the death knell for trendy anti-empirical theories, either.

However, accommodating different theories does not mean adopting them indiscriminately. The question is what criteria should be used in selecting theories. In my view, the criteria for choosing theories should be that they are sound and testable, they focus on illuminating the literary work, and they can be effectively utilized in the analysis of Chinese texts.

Currently there are many theories to choose from: gender studies, deconstructionism, new historical, postcolonial, and cultural studies, to mention only a few. I would propose that instead of slavishly following the much-worshipped authorities and theories, be they poststructuralist or others, one should be ready to critique their assertions and test the theories. In addition, I would like to suggest three theoretical approaches that have much potential for producing fruitful results in sinological as well as Sino-Western comparative studies. The first is a judicious synthesis of Chinese and Western poetics of the novel. While scholars have laid some groundwork for it, Sino-Western comparative study of the poetics of fiction awaits further refinement. The second is to draw on the empirically-based genre theory such as Claudio Guillen's (1993). Poststructuralist partisans such as Jameson tend to reject genre theory in favor of ideological or deconstructive approaches that call far more attention to the critic than to the literary work(s). However, as a scholar of comparative literature, Guillen cogently argues that cross-cultural genre approaches are likely to prove the most fruitful and enduring type of studies in his field; genre studies illuminate aspects of a given work's function and reception that influence studies often overlook. The third is to incorporate verifiable discoveries from both the natural sciences and the social sciences into the study of literature. The modified evolutionary theory has recently served as a matrix that generates insightful literary analyses. Employing the Darwinian criti-

cal paradigm, Joseph Carroll (1995) and Robert Storey (1996), for example, have successfully grounded literary study in empirical research and scientifically informed theories of an evolved human nature.

In terms of application, I would suggest avoiding the cookie-cutter approach—i.e., choose a theory, any theory, and apply it to any literary work. It would be more useful to acquire some understanding of the history of a specific theory, and then to examine carefully whether the theory fits the cultural context of the literary work under analysis. I also recommend carefully tailored approaches suited to a given context, instead of *ad hoc* improvisations. Although I believe Chinese fiction can be studied with a combination of Chinese and Western poetics, I worry about readings totally divorced from specific Chinese historical and socio-cultural contexts. A good example of such misreading of an alien culture is Roland Barthes' book, *L'empire des signes* (1970, *Empire of signs*). Exposing Barthes' own ignorance and incomprehension of Japanese culture, this book should embarrass even his admirers who praise Barthes' inanities as creative and imaginative.

I would also warn against a "top-down" approach in projecting any theory onto one or more literary works without first testing to see whether it is supported by sufficient textual evidence. Such an approach, without inductive reasoning, may lead to gross misreading. It goes almost without saying that a blanket imposition of a Western literary theory onto Chinese literature as a whole should be avoided at all costs. Rather than confusing theoretical jargons with critical rigor and superficially adopting trendy terms or citing theories, one should aim to produce literary analyses with genuine substance.

My suggestion, therefore, is for an inductive, "bottom-up" approach: looking closely at the primary literary works; then considering the historical contexts of composition and readership, aesthetic and formalist characteristics, structures of contemporaneous literature and theory; and finally, identifying those qualities which allow for cross-cultural and trans-temporal understanding of the literature. Any theory or theories selected should directly pertain to the analysis

of the primary source materials. Finally, I would propose consciously adhering to a methodology based on critical analysis and evidential research rather than exuberant flights of poststructuralist conjecture. In order to keep imaginative writers and their literature from being crowded out of the interpretive picture, we need to avoid the practice of embellishing highly speculative theories in an ethereal realm largely bereft of literature itself. And in order to highlight the literature, rather than drawing attention to the critics themselves, we need to write in a "communicative," not posturing and performative, manner.

NOTES

Despite my disagreement with some of the strategies employed by the critics under discussion here, I believe they have made many fine contributions to the field.

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[1] But note that C. T. Hsia also goes into source and biographical studies, and often discusses Chinese novels in their cultural and historical contexts.

[2] For the problem of the term *xiaoshuo*, see Hegel 394-397. For the debate on the origins of Chinese fiction, see Mair 1-27; DeWoskin 29-45; and Idema 1983, 47-51.

[3] Much as I object to labeling in general, I am using some labels for the purpose of specificity.

[4] Elvin Hatch, *Culture and Morality: The Relativity of Values in*

Anthropology (New York: Columbia UP, 1983), cited in Buck 29.

[5] See Clifford Geertz, "'Local Knowledge' and Its Limits: Some *Obiter Dicta*," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5 (1992): 129-135. Quoted in Storey, 204.

[6] I benefited from Eric Reinders' comment, despite my disagreement with his view on this issue.

[7] See, for example, Qian Zhongshu 1979 and Ninian Smart 1969.

[8] Ihab Hassan, "The Burden of Mutual Perceptions: Japan and the United States," *International House of Japan Bulletin* 10.1 (1990), p. 5, quoted in Buck 1991, 34.

[9] Harry Levin's definition is quoted in Tallis, *In Defence*, 1988, 190.

[10] "Jiang Xingge chonghui zhenzhu shan," story no. 1 in Feng Menglong (馮夢龍), *Gujin xiaoshuo* (古今小說), 2 vols. (1958; rpt. Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1979), vol. 1, 1-37. See the translation "The Pearl Shirt Reencountered" in Y. W. Ma and Joseph S. M. Lau 264-292.

[11] See also the discussion in Wong 248-249.

[12] See, for example, Granet 86-114; Needham, *The Shorter Science and Civilization in China* 1: 167, as well as his *Science in Traditional China: A Comparative Perspective* 128-131, for discussions of how the Chinese and the Western notions of time and space differ.

[13] An even more recent contribution to the discussion of the Chinese versus Western Weltanschauung is Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher, eds. *Time and Space in Chinese* Culture (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995). While this volume contains many interesting articles, the major argument made by Huang and Zürcher is not quite convincing because they somewhat simplistically take Kant's ideas on time and space as the typical Western view.

[14] See, for example, Wang Chong, "Wushi pian" (物勢篇) and "Jieshu pian" (詰術篇) in his *Lun heng* (論衡) in *Zhu zi ji cheng* (諸子集成) 7: 31-32, 242-244. Wang Chong was, of course, far more rationalistic and hard-headed than the norm among ancient Chinese

thinkers. Admittedly Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, c. 179-c. 104 B.C.) was more of an influential figure in Han Chinese thought, yet Wang Chong's skepticism also influenced later thinkers and should not be easily dismissed.

[15] See, for example, Laurence Sterne's (1713-1768) *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (New York: Heritage Press, 1935). *Tristram Shandy* is almost an anti-novel, featuring many digressions. The protagonist supposedly will discuss Tristram Shandy's birth in chapter one, but instead he presents many little stories about people and events which occur before Tristram Shandy is born. Because it frustrates the reader's expectations of a linear narrative derived from chronology and cause-and-effect sequences, *Tristram Shandy* has been hailed by postmodern critics as "postmodern" and recently by advocates of the influence of computer technology on literature as a "hypertext."

[16] Y. W. Ma and Joseph S. M. Lau 503. One of the exceptions is "Kan pixue danzheng Erlang shen" (勘皮靴單證二郎神), story no. 14 in Feng Menglong (馮夢龍), *Xingshi hengyan* (醒世恒言) 1: 241-263. See the translation "The Boot That Reveals the Culprit" in Ma and Lau 505-523.

[17] Plaks 1987, ix, quoted in Jing Wang 16.

[18] See the description of this phenomenon in Williams 173-174.

[19] See Sokal. In order to test the intellectual standards in cultural studies, Sokal, a physicist, submitted an essay on quantum physics to *Social Text*, using the jargon and ideologies favored by the editors. According to Sokal, his article was intentionally written in such a way that any scientist or "undergraduate physics or math major" would realize that "it is a spoof," but it was published by the editors who did not bother "to consult anyone knowledgeable in the subject."

[20] See Lentricchia. He now wants to find out how "we will occasionally (in our privacy) see our lives through the world-bearing words" of great works of fiction.

[21] See, for example, *Lun yü* (論語) XVIII.5, 6, 7. For a translation of these examples, see Lau, *Confucius:The Analects* 149-151.

[22] "Confucius was the sage whose actions were timely. Confucius was the one who gathered together all that was good." In *Meng Zi* (孟子) V.B.1. The translation is from Lau, *Mencius* 150.

[23] See Liu 83.

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