

Recapitulation of the Sixth Congress

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SUMMARY

This paper reviews and evaluates the papers of the Sixth Quadrennial International Comparative Literature Conference in the Republic of China. The present congress affirms the wedding of Western criticism to Eastern literatures. Whether this is a case of cultural colonialism requires considerable discussion. The conference as a whole lost sight of the major concern of the nature of comparative literature as a discipline. Many papers failed to consider the paradigms of study, internationalism, literariness and relationships, the main components of definitions of comparative literature; some papers confined themselves to a single literature and others only treated writing in the abstract without examining any literary text. In the future more attention needs to be given to the teaching of comparative literature.

KEY WORDS

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Chinese literature

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Since the present gathering marks the twentieth anniversary of the first International Comparative Literature Conference in the Republic of China and I may be considered a historical relic as perhaps the only person in existence who has attended all six of the quadrennial congresses, I shall make some preliminary comparisons between the original conference and the one that is now concluding.

The original meeting was quite properly hailed as the first international conclave devoted to comparative literature ever held in the East, and for this reason it spread a wide net. Papers were offered by several representatives from every major nation in the area except the China mainland, and there were also a half dozen or so participants from the United States. The latter were a clear minority, but were accorded places of honor and influence on the program. The foreign influence as a whole, however, greatly outweighed that from Taiwan. This week, to the contrary, almost half of the speakers represent local universities. My reason for introducing this historical note is to underscore the high reputation of the discipline of comparative literature as now practised in the ROC and the international recognition which scholars from this country have acquired during the past twenty years. The methodology of the first conference was derived from the United States and oriented primarily toward the West. At that time only a small number of comparatists existed in the ROC, nearly all of them had received their graduate training abroad, and only one or two were known in scholarly circles in other

countries. The prestigious names in the conference were those of foreigners. Today the situation is entirely different. Practically all of the participants, from the ROC or elsewhere, rank as professional comparatists. Some of them have been trained in the ROC, and several from the ROC are recognized as world class scholars. Except for the area of Chinese studies, however, there is considerably more leaning upon French and German linguistic theories and proto-philosophy than was evident twenty years ago.

The main interest of the organizers of the present conference as indicated by the first plenary speech and the concluding workshop was the development of an international descriptive terminology relevant to the discipline of comparative literature. Since both the plenary discourse and the workshop concerned particular problems of definition difficult to be briefly summarized in a brief compass such as this, all I can do is applaud the efforts of everyone concerned in this useful and highly practical enterprise.

The attention to terminology reflects the traditional approach to the discipline of comparative literature even though the conference as a whole was billed as "Problematics and Prospects . . . of the Nineties." The two other plenary papers, both of which were devoted to historical relationships based on direct contact, also continued in well established directions. One revealed that during the eighteenth century the reigning emperor of China, Ch'ien Long, was known in France and England and that his fame rested not so much upon his historical position as emperor, but upon his activities as a poet, two of his poems circulating widely in translation. The other plenary presentation showed that Europeans who read Chinese poetry during this period were interested only in its content, not style or esthetic effect. Understanding and its appreciation of the techniques and aims of Chinese poetry took place in the West thanks to three translated anthologies in French in the 1860s and 1870s, the first by a Sinologue, who

prepared a line-by-line rendition with no regard to poetic devices; the second, by a lyricist, who considered both the original and the translation as esthetic objects; and the third, by an experimental poet who made a conscientious attempt to adopt Chinese verse forms to the French language.

It was noted in the plenary address on literary terminology that Western definitions of comparative literature uniformly maintain that the crossing of national boundaries is the hallmark of comparative literatures; whereas the definition circulated by the organizers of the ICLA meeting in Tokyo does not specifically mention nations, but stresses the differences and similarities between individualities. So far as I know, however, the Tokyo ICLA concept does not speak for any other group, in Japan or elsewhere. A pertinent paper in our conference observed that in the world as constituted today, language and national boundaries do not coincide. This paper was based on an English translation of a poem recently published in a Peking newspaper, containing a concealed acrostic calling for the overthrow of the political leader Li Peng. The incident instantaneously became a world-wide *cause-célèbre*. The English translation by the author of the paper, preserving as it does the insidious acrostic, was a *tour de force* matching the brilliance of the original. The paper was notable as well for its comments on the interrelations between freedom, politics, and literature.

Except in the workshop on literary terminology, translation as such did not figure as a major concern in the present conference unlike previous ones, perhaps because of the anomalous relationship between ubiquitous theories questioning the possibility of conveying fixed meanings through the process of reading itself and the basic assumption of the concept of translation that not only can an author's original meaning be ascertained, but that it can be transmitted to another language.

The most radical vocabulary specifically devoted to

speculation about the future appeared in a paper alluding to the concepts of "communication theory," "information age," and "the postmodern disqualification of narrative, rhetorical and poetic knowledge." The author's main purpose, however, was to establish a parallel between science and literature under the rubric of "ecological hermeneutics." Actually there is little new in this effort. In the old days when science was labelled Newtonian and its laws were considered as fixed and unchangeable, various attempts were made to discover similar stable conditions in literature. The author of the paper himself points to "(old) New Criticism, archetypal criticism and structuralism, each seeking to find the 'stable' elements or foundations . . . in 'self-evident' critical jargons, archetypal mythemes, or underlying substructures." He could have gone much further back, for example, to Voltaire and classical theory or to Auguste Comte and Positive philosophy for other examples of the supposed science-literature parallel. The novelty in the pairing of ecology and hermeneutics consists in the use of recent discoveries in physics and mathematics to portray the shift to scientific suppositions "from the ideal of deterministic, reproducible, and thereby universally consensual knowledge to local, fragmentary modes of analysis." According to his parallel, literature is also local, fragmentary and arbitrary. The code word applied to both systems is "chaos." A similar mode of argument from the new attitude toward science has been utilized also in the United States by evangelical Christians to attack religious sceptics: since the stability of science has been undermined, these Christians maintain, rationalistic objects against their doctrine are no longer valid. This reasoning has not brought about a great religious revival. In introducing it, I am not setting up my own parallel between evangelical Christianity and new modes of criticism, but merely suggesting that science and literature are not twin systems even though both depend upon rules of rational discourse. Science is concerned with things as they

are; literature with things not only as they are, but also as they have been, as they might be, and as they never have been and never will be.

A related paper designed toward erecting a "Chinese Hermeneutics" examined as a preliminary step the two sides in the Western debate concerning the possibility of knowledge, one school insisting on "a definite meaning inherent in a certain text" and the other affirming that meaning is "changeable, deeply rooted in the situatedness of the interpreter." He attributed to an American theorist the proclamation "all interpretations are misinterpretations," a proposition that another panelist attributed to a French critic. Fundamentally the paradox is a revival of the old saw in Italian, "traduttore, traditore" (or "translation, betrayal"), and contains about the same proportions of truth and fallaciousness. In view of the "rampant critical theories" in the West, which the author arbitrarily accepts as the dominant culture, he essentially abandoned his purpose, concluding that the Chinese critic is "forced to stand between the power of the dominant culture and the impersonal system of disciplines and methods, provided by the dominant voice."

Another paper, one concerned with demonstrating organic unity, also tacitly and implicitly accepted the West as the dominant culture, a conclusion obviously also relevant to the panel on colonialism. The first five pages of the paper outlined the "deconstructive view of structure," a view that denies the notion of literary unity. Instead of firmly rejecting the notion of deconstruction, however, the author made the compromising statement that "no interpretation of structure or unity can be final" and proceeded to base his subsequent twenty-five pages of demonstration on traditional historical criticism that admits "the constructive side of the organic concept."

A well-documented and closely reasoned paper comparing Chinese poetic language with Western, embracing in its title the metaphor "The Antelope that Leaves no Trace," also

accepted unity and the organic concept, but relied chiefly on Chinese critics. The author concluded that the resemblances between Chinese and Western literatures are more extensive than differences. In his words, "There is no real or determinate ground for an essential 'difference' between Chinese and Western poetic language." A separate paper on Hu Shih's Poetic Program concluded with a quotation from this Chinese *avant garde* author affirming essentially the same notion, that "the language of poetry is not different from the language of prose after all."

The sole paper by a Japanese scholar correctly observed that England has produced only one literary theoretician, and I add that in Japan there are none. The title of the Japanese paper, nevertheless, referred to deconstructionist theories and seemed to indicate allegiance to, as the author puts it, the "crazy sound and fury" of the last fifteen years. In actuality, however, he is protesting against the "linguistic nihilism" of French and Anglo-Saxon literary academics and the "I-am-the-No.1-authority principle" of its leading exponents. As the spokesman for "Asian anti-crisis literary men, for whom to talk the Poetic and the Erotic are more natural than to challenge a destructive nihilo-psychic battle now prevailing in Europe and America," he affirmed that "even after all strong points and advantages are investigated through the Deconstructionist or Revisionist theories, what will abide as essential values are only the 'Aesthetic' and the 'Goodness,' together with what is 'Newer' and 'Stronger,' and what is 'Sweet,' which are truly the final meanings and aims of poetry and literature." Despite his somewhat ambiguous reference to the 'newer' and 'stronger,' this author advocated the return to the prelogical and mythical. Although he did not make it clear whether he was referring to anthropological research or to literary thematology, he affirmed that the role of poets and critics is to "comprehend the two poles, psychic and chthonic" of "The Mythomorphic," quoting four twentieth-century poems

to illustrate his principles. In some ways, he seemed to be reviving the notion of Sweetness and Light proclaimed in previous centuries by Jonathan Swift and Mathew Arnold.

Two papers on oral imaginative communication, without directly joining the debate over nihilistic linguistics, nevertheless introduced a principle that is ordinarily overlooked in critical debate, that is, that oral communication is different from reading. Theories concerning the interpretation of reading may or may not apply to orality. One paper concerned with theory and modernism began with oral transmission, but did not go any further than the Russian formalists, adopting their position that the essence of literary studies consists in depriving them of ideas and world views not acquired exclusively by reading. Most theories of reader-response, however, affirm the opposite. A paper in the Chinese panel on text, orality, and dialogue suggested that other elements are more fundamental to the transmission of literary texts than the arguments advanced by competing schools of interpretation over the difficulty or alleged impossibility of conveying meaning through language. These elements comprise such procedures as reconciling oral and written cultures, dating manuscripts, analysing different calligraphic hands, and identifying editorial corrections or instructions. According to this paper, when ancient manuscripts were tapped by oral story-tellers, each performance, "generating and regenerating new texts," comprised a "dialogue between the story teller and his culture-history and situation-specific audience." In this context, doubts about any individual's correct or meticulously exact interpretations decline in significance.

A contrary emphasis on the visual appeared in a paper objecting to the simplistic and artificial reduction process in treating every cultural produce as a "text." By translating everything into "reading," the author observed, we frequently overlook the importance of artistic images such as those which she proceeded to analyze in the poetry of Pa-ta

Shan-jen. The resemblance between poetry and painting affirmed in the West in Roman times by the phrase *Ut pictura poesis* and later treated as a commonplace has been neglected in recent Western theories. This paper served as a reminder that in China, poetry and painting have been traditionally used to "complement and define each other."

A contrast between Chinese and Western attitudes toward mimesis appeared in a paper on the influence of the Italian critic Benedetto Croce on a modern Chinese philosopher, Chu Kuang-ch'ien. In his early thought, the latter borrowed extensively from his Italian forerunner, but eventually reacted against Croce's extreme formalism, which maintained that all considerations beyond purely formal ones are outside the domain of esthetics. Chu realized that human life is an organism and that all intellectual activities are connected. He also observed that in Western art, a horse in a painting should look like a real horse and that from this perspective Chinese art is inadequate, but added that although Western art has its merits and Chinese has its defects, "the merits of the one do not lie in its closeness to nature, just as the defects of the other do not stem from its failure to be naturalistic."

A paper exploring the mutual relations between Chinese literature and travel literature suggested that many opportunities lie open for research in this area. The paper itself, concentrating on the fiction of Lu Xun, might be considered as an example of "back to the future," since the relations between travel books and imaginative literature have long been a staple of Western historical research. The most popular of all Western examples of the genre, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, I might observe, was not translated into Chinese until the present century, and one of the papers on pedagogy points out that contemporary university students in Taiwan find little interest in it.

As I have already indicated, one of the newest critical concepts, that of literary colonialism, cropped up in a number

of papers not presented in the panel specifically devoted to that subject. I have alluded to references to dominant and subordinate cultures in which it was suggested that the ready adoption in Taiwan of Western literary theories almost as soon as they take root in the United States and Europe is a type of cultural colonialism. The significance of this alleged relationship warrants extended consideration. Colonialism suggests a conscious will on the part of one nation to dominate others, politically, economically, or culturally. We might ask whether colonialization is really involved in ordinary literary influence and the willingness of scholars in one part of the world to follow intellectual bellwethers of criticism from other nations. If Taiwan is to be considered a captive culture because of its surrender to Western theory, does this consideration in itself place Japan among the culturally dominant nations for resisting it? Are France and the United States necessarily more rapacious culturally than England that also has not soared into the outer limits of literary theory? It does seem, in the West at least, that the nations with the greatest political power also produce writers with the greatest world recognition, but there are exceptions, to take, for example, two treated in the present conference, Henrik Ibsen of Norway and Salman Rushdie of the contemporary Third World. Comparatists both East and West have joined in opposing the Eurocentrism of institutionalized literary study, but does this mean that writers considered as major who also happen to be European should be neglected henceforth? I am personally a supporter of a new international organization devoted to EuroSinica studies and like its other members do not believe that literary influence necessarily reflects the desire of the emitting nation to dominate the receiving one. A pertinent illustration of non-political influence was offered in a paper on the introduction of foreign myths to China early in the present century. These myths, primarily Greek, Roman and Nordic, were introduced by Mao

Tun, one of the earliest scholars of Chinese mythology, from an English compilation by Andrew Lang. Since these myths represented the primitive stages of Western culture, they can hardly be interpreted as weapons of imperialism.

One of the most interesting papers involving colonialism concerned the alleged use of the critical process to transform *The Dream of the Red Chamber* from a "cautionary tale about private life, written in a traditionally minor vernacular genre, into a major classic henceforth endowed with large symbolic meanings bearing on public and national issues." This rise of *Hong-lou-meng* to reverent canonicity is presumably linked to a type of internal colonization, the "wish to territorialize and domesticate alien elements." The author discerned colonial attitudes in both Marxism and anti-Marxism and interpreted the dominance of Confucian norms and ideals over Taoist ones in *Hong-lou-meng* as a cultural version of political colonization. On a broader scale while assuming that major literatures belong only to major or colonizing states, he offered opposing definitions of minor literatures, first, that they come from minor languages and, second, that they are constructed by a minority within a major language. According to this paper, the status of a work when it is regarded as minor and consequently untarnished by colonialism is superior to its status when it is elevated to masterpiece level. This is a novel support to pre-modernist arguments against basing literary study exclusively on world masterpieces.

A paper on *Hong-lou-meng* from a contrary and more conventional perspective treated the importance of dreams and dream symbolism in the work, which the author of the paper accepted "as an encyclopedic compendium of an entire tradition." His paper, treating the dream as both a psycho-physiological phenomenon and a literary device, in itself provided an encyclopedic history of the theme of dreams in Chinese literature, including the notion shared by some Western writers of the seventeenth century that life is a

dream. The body of the paper offered a detailed and percipient analysis of the artistry of Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in in "juxtaposing the real and the unreal, the mundane and the idealized, the true and the false or imaginary" in order to develop the life-is-a-dream view of existence. Chinese philosophy also figured prominently in a paper on the influence of Taoist romantic consciousness on Chinese literature, that perspective which like that in Western romanticism prefers to describe existence in terms of the intangible and impalpable rather than the real and actual. The author found common ground in Plato and Taoism in contrast to a famous Western critic of the early part of this century, Irving Babbitt, who separated Plato from both Taoism and Romanticism in a fierce attack upon the latter.

In speculation on colonialization in the political world of the present, it is not an easy matter to define the role of the various Arab states. Arab literature, moreover, is not considered of major importance in the EuroSino milieu, although a paper from a native of Kuwait was well received when delivered at the fourth conference in 1983. A paper at the present one on "cultural 'Off-Centring'" in Salman Rushdie's *Shame* is only tangentially related to colonialization. "Off-Centring" in this context has nothing to do with the "absence of center" of some theoretical linguists, but refers to cross-cultural perspectives that jolt the reader from his ingrained expectations or cultural assumptions. Most of the paper treated narrative devices resembling those of Hispanic magic realism, and the question of dominant and repressed cultures was raised only indirectly in regard to emigrants and immigrants.

The subject of colonialization and immigration occupied a more central position in a paper on Maxine Hong Kingston, an American-born Chinese who has made a name for herself by focusing on the courageous struggles of ethnic Chinese in the United States against oppression and racial prejudice. Among the various role models in her semi-autobiographical work

China Men, Kingston presents an enterprising sailor Lo Bun Sun as parallel to various Chinese cultural heroes. The paper revealed, however, that this mythical figure is not Chinese at all, but a reincarnation of Daniel Defoe's English protagonist Robinson Crusoe and, even more serious, that the Anglo-Saxon folk hero embodies characteristics completely antithetical to Kingston's image of the ideal Chinese-American male. In the author's words, he is "a racist, white imperialist, ideologically Protestant, anti-feminist, and militaristic character." In exposing the original novel *Robinson Crusoe*, moreover, as "one of the most virulent anti-Chinese works of the eighteenth century," the author's analysis portrayed Kingston's cultural plagiarism as backfiring against the image she has cultivated as a feminist and vindicator of ethnic pride. I suppose it might also be taken as another example of cultural colonialism.

Lao She, one of the Twentieth-century Chinese masters of fiction most acutely aware of white domination of his race, was treated by two papers, but neither touched on his condemnation of colonialism. Instead the topic of food and eating in his novel *Divorce* analyzed in one of the papers in reference to Western gustatory traditions provided a welcome relief from the diet of epistemological linguistics served up in many other communications.

Several papers other than the one on Kingston pursued the contemporary topic of gender relationships, one of the most novel of which sympathetically portrayed Pao-yü, the protagonist of *Hong-lou-meng*, on the grounds that he overturns the Confucian view of masculine superiority. The author used Chinese conventional criticism and Western psychological theories to reinterpret Pao-yü's enunciation "Girls are made of water" as representing a composite of virtue, this designation perhaps approaching the Western phrase for young women, "sugar and spice and everything nice." Essentially the author attempted to prove that Pao-yü

rejects the master-slave relationship in favor of a sexual response that puts the other before the self, admittedly a utopian mode of sexual relationships. Despite the ingenuity of the author's argument, it is difficult to reconcile the ideal of sexual equality it embodies with the obvious masculine dominant polygamy in the novel and the culture it represents.

The utopian attitude toward sexual relationships attributed to Pao-yü resembles that of moderate modern feminists who reject the rigid dichotomy between masculine and feminine in favor of a theory of androgyny or ambivalence. A paper on gender stressed contemporary theories of sexuality that reinforce this attitude of reconciling sexual differences or even accepting gender reversal. The author succeeded well enough in demonstrating common elements in two or three theorists, but his attempt to apply his theoretical melange to literary texts in order to develop common elements in the Greek drama *Agamemnon* and Chinese tales of the fantastic in *Liao-chai chih-yi* was less successful. *Agamemnon* is a serious tragedy and the Chinese tales slap-stick comedy, and in *Agamemnon* in particular social forces other than sexuality are at issue.

Another paper on gender used the metaphor of a striptease to expose the areas in two novels of Taiwan that would be likely to elude the male gaze. Despite her analysis of these works, this author admitted that she was unable to decipher "the correct feminine practice of writing" and revealed a similar uncertainty concerning the existence of "a link between women's bodily experience and feminine writing." Feminist issues emerged also in a paper on Schiller's concept of the self which stresses the German author's attachment to the principle of feminine equality. It demonstrated in addition the resemblance of some modern theories to Schiller's notions of sensibility.

Two papers in the conference treated Hispanic literature, and one, Italian, a welcome addition to Western areas other

than the dominating ones of France, Germany, the United States and England. One of these papers pointed out somewhat of a parallel in Latin-America to this European cultural domination since the mainstream of Hispanic criticism has been unaware of the influence of Asiatic writers in the former Spanish colonies or has deliberately minimized it. The Spanish word *Chinerias* has been used to imply superficial orientalism, parallel to the more common *Chinoiserie* in French. A paper on a work by the Spanish philosopher-novelist Miguel Unamuno entitled *Notes Toward a Treatise on Origami* (Japanese paper-folding) might seem to be concerned with *Japonaiserie* (superficial Japanism) except that the treatise seriously reflects Unamuno's interest in oriental thought. The paper revealed that the Spanish novelist himself engaged in the art of making paper birds and that his treatise ascends from a parody of alleged scientific methods applied to pedagogy towards philosophical discussion of the superiority of religious faith to dependence on reason. Another paper in the section offered an analysis of the mirror image in the thought and poetry of Ezra Pound together with analogues in Plato, Dante and the imagery of light in a Chinese ideogram. Plato figured largely as well in a paper on the allegory of the cave along with Edmund Spenser, the Chinese seventeenth-century novelist Tung Yüeh, and the latter's Spanish equivalent, Cervantes.

At the first conference twenty years ago, the principal theoretical concerns comprised defining the nature of comparative literature as a discipline and deciding whether the critical methods of the West should be adapted to the literature of the East. I do not know how the projected international dictionary under the auspices of the ICLA will portray the discipline as a whole, but the paper delivered by the director of the project indicated that all major definitions, both Western and Eastern, amount to variations on four paradigms: "Comparative literature is 1) the study 2) of international 3) literary 4) relations." At the present con-

ference the question of wedding Western criticism to Eastern literatures seems to have been answered in the affirmative. Whether or not this apparent consensus is a sign of cultural colonialism is a matter requiring considerable more discussion. The conference at large seems to have lost sight of the other major concern--that of the nature of comparative literature as a discipline. Many of the papers failed to embody the four paradigms of study, internationalism, literariness and relationships. Some confined themselves to a single literature and others even managed to treat writing in the abstract without examining any specific literary works at all. Perhaps more attention needs to be given in the future to the topic of the sixth panel, the teaching of comparative literature. Despite announcement of the panel on this subject, no section in the actual proceedings was devoted to it, and the only two papers relevant to pedagogy--both of which were excellent--were ranked under interdisciplinary approaches.

In conclusion, the panel on trends in literary theory, as was expected, attracted most attention, but the adherence of twenty years ago to the methods of New Criticism was replaced by loyalties to a multiplicity of theories and their individual exponents. Surprisingly, the feminists seem to have overwhelmed the deconstructionists, perhaps because feminist theory is in large measure dependent upon history and ascertainable reality. The topic given priority by the organizers of developing an international terminology of comparative literature had its genesis in an ICLA project initiated 35 years ago. Other conventional methods of the discipline, particularly tracing relations between two or more national literatures, were also given serious attention. The terms Postmodernism was rarely heard, perhaps because many of the elements ranked under this rubric hark back to conservative standards of the past. The situation today and the likely prognosis for the future, therefore, would seem to represent superficial innovation, but basic stability.

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