

## Book Review

Zhang Longxi: *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (Durham and London, Duke UP, 1992)

Professor Zhang Longxi's *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1992) displays a remarkable erudition as it ranges over many philosophical and literary topics (such as whether artistic creativity is conscious or unconscious, and whether authorial intention is relevant), and demonstrates familiarity with the literary theories of everyone from Plato and Kant to Gadamer and Derrida in the West, and from the *I Ching* and Zhuangzi to Nagarjuna and Qian Zhongshu in the East. The "centerpiece of the argument in this book," he says, is the "poetics of silence" and suggestiveness, which he defines as the view that "the meaning and the beauty of poetry reside not so much in what is said as in what is implied by keeping silent" (171); similarly, he says: "Like blank [as in blank spaces in Chinese landscape painting], nothingness, and silence, void and quietude are important to poetry because they contain, in their very emptiness and stillness, the possibility for imagination and enrichment, the great possibility of poetry" (173). He beautifully illustrates his point with the example of Homer's Helen of Troy of whom he says "Not a single word in the Homeric text describes her face or figure, her clothing or ornament. . . ." (164)--thus permitting the reader to take full advantage of his own creative imagination as he fleshes out Helen's beauty which has not suffered overdetermination by the text's explicit description. This "poetics of silence" has its roots in the East in *Chan* (i.e., Zen) and Taoism, and seems to suggest that the author agrees with much modern literary theory that reader response is more defining of a text's

meaning than either the text itself or the author's intentions. In fact, however, one of the other main ideas in this book is that literary critics would do well to follow the example of tolerance and pluralism found in the Chinese tradition, and admit that the meaning of a text is a function of all three contributing factors. Thus extremists like E.D. Hirsch on the one hand, who insist that the only bona fide meaning is the author's intended meaning, and Wimsatt and Beardsley (and New Criticism) on the other hand who insist that author's intentions are irrelevant, are both wrong. Perhaps Zhang's third main thesis is that the Eastern and Western literary/critical traditions are not incomparable; more specifically, they share a "logocentric" metaphysical hierarchy of thinking, speaking, writing, and their respective notions of *Tao* and *logos* are similar in betraying this shared privileging of thinking over speaking over writing. This "logocentric" tradition in China supposedly derives from the *I Ching*, but in fact, the prioritizing of thinking over speaking over writing may be found in the *I Ching*, but is not a prominent or frequent topic in that book. Furthermore, some contemporary theorists (e.g., Chad Hansen, in *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, Oxford, 1992) would take issue with his reference to "concern about the loss of inner reality" in the Chinese tradition, since that tradition seems to favor a pragmatic view of language such that meaning is use rather than reflection of some mysterious "inner reality" of thought. He also gives an unsatisfactory explanation of the central paradox of Taoism which says ("those who know don't speak, and those who speak don't know"); this paradox disappears if we see Lao Tzu (Laozi) and Chuang Tzu (Zhuangzi) as showing, by use of parable, paradox, etc., that language cannot catch the ultimate mystery of reality in its net, but his simplistic explanation is the legend that Lao Tzu decided to speak about the unspeakable because the Gatekeeper asked him to. One stylistic objection to Zhang's book is that whereas he provides

a profusion of quotations and verses in the original French and German (with English translations), when he quotes Chinese poetry or uses technical terminology from the Chinese literary critical tradition (e.g. *hanxu*, "fruitful implicitness," 167) he doesn't provide the original Chinese characters in his text or in a Chinese glossary which would have been useful. The most serious problem, however, is that Zhang talks about so many different topics and theorists that sometimes it almost seems as though he is free-associating and it is easy for the reader to lose the thread of his argument. It is not until the final (and most interesting) chapter "Author, Text, Reader" that the various threads of argument are woven together around the themes of silence and suggestiveness and reader response.

As Eugene Eoyang says, there are many "telling insights" in Tao and the Logos. In fact there are so many quotable insights that I can't begin here to mention them all, but let me give a few examples. In the first chapter Zhang remarks that Schopenhauer's concept of genius "detects a close relationship, a kind of kinship, between genius and madness" (8). And in the same chapter he refers to the Chinese tradition "with its emphasis on accumulative wisdom rather than individual originality." I also agree with his views that *Tao* is both transcendent and immanent (27), that much of the terminology of deconstruction is of little use (31), and that all language is metaphorical (41). He offers interesting insights into both Chinese literature and Western literature. For instance, he notes that according to Chuang Tzu "the play of metaphor blurs the usual distinction between philosophy and literature" (40), and regarding the famous dream/butterfly story in *Chuang Tzu* he explains that "The dream is a fascinating fable of identity, or rather the illusion of identity, as it puts into question the very boundaries between dream and reality, Self and Other, being and becoming" (149). As examples of his insights into Western literature, we may cite his view that "In

Shakespeare's sonnets, . . . the final couplet often forms a contrast to the structure of the preceding lines . . . ,” and his claim that the Homeric epics and biblical narrative are “the two great fountainheads of Western literature and culture” (159).

While I do not agree with all that he says in his book, for example that according to Freud “sublimation of the Oedipus complex is what *Hamlet* is all about” (140), still, Zhang's *The Tao and the Logos* is a well-written, highly readable, thought-provoking meditation on numerous issues in literary hermeneutics.

*Jess Fleming*

*Tamkang University*