Major Themes at the Fourth International Conference in the Republic of China

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The opening session of this highly-successful conference introduced the concept of utopia, or the attaining of the ideal way of life. Indeed the conference itself as a collective enterprise could even be considered as a pragmatic utopia, that is, the realization of a humanistic ideal, the study of literature from a completely international point of view. The eminent French scholar Etiemble has even conceived of comparative literature itself as an intellectual force with the capability of transcending the concrete manifestations of all actual literature by means of social activism in order to create a future ideal "universal city of literatures" or utopia. As part of his internationalism, Etiemble envisions a universal written language based on Chinese ideogram characters, which people of diverse languages may convert orally into their own idioms. Ideal as it is, this goal is probably as practical as many of those proposed by such visionaries as Thomas More, Edward Bellamy or K'ang Yu-wei.

The notion of utopia emerged as a minor theme in several papers – as the Biblical Eden in the American tradition [Miller], the landscape itself in the Chinese Tao [Lee], the ancient Chinese nation abounding in wealth, fruits, grain, gold and silver [Jawad], the inside and outside of the poetic spirit [Moon], the attempt in current politics "to break through the determinism of the armaments race" [Fokkema], and even a key-term in the theory of narrative formulated by the Hungarian Marxist Lukács [Hall].

Happily most of the participants steered clear of the perennial debate over the real essence of comparative literature. One scholar appropriately indicated, however, that the discipline consists in large measure of comprehending one literary phenomenon by means of another more at hand and familiar [Unali]. Another scholar made the common sense observation that no single methodology should be either sanctified or discriminated against merely for the label's sake; "its legitimacy must depend on the extent that it helps advance our understanding of a literary phenomenon." All of us in our

privileged profession of teachers could well keep in mind the admonition of an eighteenth-century French critic Joubert that in any valid comparison one should reveal two truths at the same time.

One scholar in an ambitious attempt to survey the theory of thematology in the West and East characterized the method as "an outgrowth of the 19th-century German mania for folklore." He consequently accorded myth and folklore center stage in the rest of his exposition. This is somewhat of a departure from the second Tamkang conference, where, as I remember, some folklorists who were present complained that the discipline of comparative literature has almost entirely neglected their domain. It is hardly necessary to state that themes were studied historically long before the advent of any textbook of comparative literature, and in the western tradition themes are frequently associated with the history of ideas. The alternate approach through myth and folklore may, however, be more appropriate for eastern literatures. Several papers touched upon the concept that Chinese narrative, like Chinese poetry, is less conceptual and explicit than western counterparts, and this may explain why the history of ideas approach is more appropriate for the West than the East. The paper to which I originally referred defines thematology as "the study of the evolution of specific themes, motifs, and especially mythical figures, dealing at the same time with different writers' treatment of a same theme or motif to voice out their preoccupations and to reflect their times." Few of the papers in the conference, however, followed this prescription. Neither ideas nor mythical figures were treated extensively.

Several of the themes actually introduced were developed from a sociological perspective. Considerable and well-deserved attention was devoted to a well-known novel in both China and the United States, *The Woman Warrior* by a Chinamerican, Maxine Hong Kingston. This novel was analyzed both thematically and stylistically by various scholars. One portrayed the novel as an account of the author's "anguished search for selfhood and for coherence," while developing the theme of woman as a victim and woman as a victor [Ling]. The protagonist's aunt having born an illegitimate child and suffered the stigma attached to her situation is driven to madness and eventually a degrading suicide through drowning in a well. She is the victim. The protagonist's mother, on the other hand, against great odds enrolls in a medical school and emerges as a licensed midwife, while serving as a role model for her daughter. The mother is the victor. Accompanying or perhaps transcending these themes of personal tragedy and victory is the sociological

background of the protagonist, reflecting the struggles of ethnic Chinese in American society. Kingston's recording of the tension between her racial background and her American self was skillfully compared to similar experiences of American writers from other ethnic groups. These books were portrayed as part of a "large wave revitalizing contemporary literature" in reaction to the hollowness of the nouveau roman. The speaker asserted that "life demands meaning, purpose, and affirmation." In my opinion, this was a refreshing note in the conference.

Concentration on ethnic minorities represents a new direction in the study of American literature, parallel to the thrust of comparative studies and certainly contributing to the understanding of universal literature. A paper on cultural consciousness amid the multi-cultures of American society revealed that the traditional concept of the United States as a melting pot is being replaced by racial awareness and cultural autonomy. Traditional textbooks of American literature have emphasized national themes, focussing on common or shared creeds, values, and mores in order to establish the typical and the uniform as national prototypes. The current objective of placing the various ethnic American literatures in their respective cultural contexts was presented as perhaps "the key to the next literary history of the United States" [Wayne Miller]. Comparatists especially will not quarrel with this goal. Most Americans recognize that their best restaurants are the ethnic ones, and they should presumably welcome efforts to keep their literary production and criticism from emulating the uniformity of the fast food industry.

Escape, survival, and exile are other themes with sociological overtones introduced during the conference. Western *fin de siècle* estheticism was revealed as the means chosen by a Korean writer of the 1930s to escape from the drabness of daily life during the Japanese occupation of his country [Bangok Lee]. Survival was delineated in an analysis of two novels concerning the mass killings accompanying the dropping of the atomic bomb in Japan. In comparing John Hersey's *Hiroshima* and Ibusi Masuji's *Black Rain,* the author observed that "writing itself is an affirmation in an age when man's destructive capacity not only matches his worst imaginations but also threatens to exterminate the creature who imagines" [Dorsey]. Exile was treated by another scholar in connection with a Chinese poet of the fourth century, Hsieh Ling-Yun. The author revealed that much of the poet's work concerns his actual contact with the landscape of the country where he was exiled – obviously nothing unusual for Chinese poetry -- and

that he also expressed the sorrow, grief and loneliness resulting from the enforced absence from his native land. Unfortunately this paper completely lacked a comparatist component, which could have been supplied by reference to the parallel experience of the Latin poet Ovid, who was also exiled to a coastal town at about the same period in history. The presentation could also be improved by a contrast of poems written before the banishment with those written afterward in order to determine whether the forms of expression were based on the experience of exile itself or instead on dominant poetic conventions of the time.

An American scholar quoted an eminent Chinese critic now living in the United States to the effect that the seven major themes characteristic of Chinese thought and feeling are nature, time, history, leisure, nostalgia, and rapture with wine [McLeod]. But apart from nostalgia, which is associated with exile, none of these themes was formally treated in the conference. Needless to say, however, some echoes of the rapture with wine were heard at the wine-tasting session on the opening day. Another scholar added the theme of eroticism as it occurs in Chinese fiction [Wang], and this element was also analyzed as part of the emotion of love in the Chinese *Book of Odes* and the western *Song of Songs* [Dai].

Most extensive treatment of a single theme was accorded to poetic Narcissism in Korean literature, which in actuality is only superficially connected with the Narcissus theme in Greece [Moon]. Regardless of the outcome of the handsome Greek's self-infatuation, his scrutiny of his own image provided pleasure; whereas the examples of Narcissism from Korea for the most part represent sadness. Also as another paper pointed out, the myth of Narcissus became the center of the universe as perceived by western Symbolists [Fokkema]. His love of himself is as 'unnatural' in this setting "as the varyingly interpreted mysterious motivations of Salomé." The classic Korean version concerns a pair of parrots. The female dies and the male is stricken with grief. The king orders a mirror to be placed in front of his cage, and the parrot, at first assuming he was seeing another of his own species, began pecking at it. But when he realized it was nothing but his own reflected image, he died of grief. The other Korean examples suggest a number of other possible reactions to one's reflected image: identification (the original Narcissus situation), idealization, rejection, and even hatred. The mirror may even represent a separate world as in the fantasy of Lewis Carroll.

In a later version of the Korean parrot story, the king himself loses his

wife and his courtiers suggest that he remarry. He replies that if a bereaved bird grieves for the loss of its mate, he should also respect the memory of his wife. A number of other papers treated birds or animals as symbols or representatives of human beings. One author, analyzing three plays of the seventeenth century, two English and one Chinese, pointed out that in both Chinese and English cultures the wolf and the dog evoke cruelty, cunning ferocity and rapine [Leung]. The crane, however, occupied a privileged position in Chinese letters while almost entirely absent from those of the West. In Europe the cuckoo is celebrated for laying its eggs in the nests of other birds, and in China its cry symbolizes nostalgic longing. Both cultures employ mythical creatures, especially the dragon, the unicorn and the phoenix. Animals are used as symbols of both perpetrators and victims of violence, but in the three plays in question animal imagery has as its main purpose the underscoring of the brutish in man.

The earlier exiled Chinese poet to whom I have already alluded looked upon himself as "a hibernating dragon, a measuring worm" [Yu ch'eng Lee]. The exposition of multi-ethnic society in the United States revealed how early American culture has been portrayed as a snake "sloughing off its skin as it grows too large for its old one" [Wayne Miller]. In various modern dystopias, moreover, such as *Animal Farm* and the *City of Cats* animals are used to portray a variety of human characteristics. A Japanese scholar showed how the black American poet Richard Wright developed the English "haiku" as a genre. In one of his poems Wright humorously personified the domestic animal:

> With a twitching nose
> A dog reads a telegram
> On a wet tree trunk. [Kodama]

We were also told that in Korean fiction of the early twentieth century a boy's angelic innocence is reduced to "the bestiality of a wolf," and a female character determines to pounce upon a man who has not returned her love, in her words, "tear him apart with my claws, and suck his blood to my heart's content" [Sangok Lee]. Some participants of the conference who are oriented toward esoteric schemes of criticism have objected that themes and imagery such as the foregoing are so commonplace that they are not worthy of serious attention, but it is precisely the element of universality which makes them appropriate to be discussed in an international forum such

as this. In contrast, many of the critical theories expounded under the rubric of thematology have merely historical interest, for their vogue lies already buried in the past. Even the more current systems are relevant merely to selected texts in western national literatures alone.

A classic example of the universality of animal symbols is the collection of fables attributed to AEsop of ancient Greece. A paper combining thematology with literary history traced the influence of these fables in the East, especially in Japan [Kobori]. A purely historical treatment should perhaps have indicated in addition the origins in the East of some of these fables, but the purpose of this author was primarily to illustrate the shifting interpretations of various symbols in successive chronological periods. Before World War II, animal fables were utilized in Japan as media of moral instruction in the elementary grades, but as in other parts of the world there now exists a much lesser tendency to weave ethics into the preliminary stages of education. The fable of the frog and the cow – a contrast to the legend of Narcissus – illustrates a political interpretation. A frog envious of the large size of a cow perceived in a meadow puffed herself up to her maximum size out of envy and a spirit of rivalry and continued the effort to such an extent that the finally burst and fell over dead. The great Japanese novelist Soseki in 1909 applied this fable to the aspiration of the Japanese people to rival the western nations of his time. In Soseki's words, "It's like the frog that tried to outdo the cow – look, Japan's belly is bursting." A related paper tracing intercultural relations between India and England during the nineteenth century showed how the fables in *The Arabian Nights* could be "attuned to the spirit of mercantile enterprise of the English people" in extending their world-wide economic empire [Unali].

To western readers *The Arabian Nights* represents the ultimate in romantic mystery and splendor, but a speaker from the modern Arab world revealed that from earliest times "in Arab chronicles, travelogues and wondertales" China has occupied a vital place always associated with wealth and exoticism [Jawad]. The famous fourteenth-century Moroccan traveler, Ibn Batuta, moreover, described Chinese women as "surpassing beauty." According to the Arab scholar, the realistic description of Batuta served to explode the myths which heavily enriched the tales of wonder in the *Arabian Nights* such as Sinbad the Sailor.

One of the papers offered a vigorous criticism of the comparative method as it is commonly practiced in the area of East-West relations. According to this author, affinity studies are likely to be lame or superficial,

and the comparison of individual works or period styles often degenerates from lameness into "the wheelchair of modish critical jargon" [Idema]. This author proposes as an alternative "the comparative study of the concept of literature – whether explicitly formulated in writings on literature, or indirectly observable productions, reception, and preservation of literary works" together with "the comparative study of authors as a social group and their role in society." This, I interpret, not as a call for comparing literatures as coherent wholes, but rather for a reinvigoration of the sociology of literature. The application of this scholar's method consisted in a comparison of literary clubs or societies in two countries, Chinese *shu-hui* and Dutch *kamers rhetoriken.*

Since English was the official language of the conference, it is hardly surprising that most of the western writers treated were English and American. The papers on criticism, of course, ranged over Russian, Hungarian, French and German texts as well, but presumably they had been studied in English translation. Since criticism has become almost an autonomous discipline, authors of these papers did not necessarily profess knowledge of the literatures represented by their favorite western critics. The truly international flavor of the conference was strengthened by papers on German influence in Korea [Park and Yoo-yung Lee], Arab notions of China [Jawad], and relations between England and India in the nineteenth century [Unali].

The papers on genology did not devote themselves to distinguishing or describing the various literary kinds, but instead analyzed techniques of narrative or poetic expression. One paper expounded the theory of totality in Karl Marx and its application to literature as interpreted by Lukacs and other Marxist critics [Hall]. Presented as a study in the history of ideas, this paper would undoubtedly be welcomed in a journal of that discipline, but it appeared anomalous in the present context. The theory of totality in its literary manifestation assumes that all novels are constructed on an identical principle, which is a completely erroneous assumption even in regard to European fiction let alone that of the rest of the world, particularly China and Japan. Happily this monolithic approach was not adopted by the author of an analysis of the storytelling context in Chinese fiction [Wang], which revealed parallels with a variety of narrative techniques in the West such as complete individual texts within a frame story, the magisterial narrator, direct speech, the first-person point of view, and the characterized fictive reader. A further paper involving *The Woman Warrior* treated the

mixing of the fictional and autobiographical genres [Lucien Miller]. As a welcome relief to the irrelevant theory in some other papers, this author gave a sparkling example of the omniscient narrator interjecting an editorial explanation by affirming "solace is purely spiritual but it is used here as a euphemism for sex." This author analyzed among other narrative techniques various methods of obtaining visual perspective.

Matters of perspective were taken up also in a paper on the voice or "I" in classical Chinese poetry, which was based on the premise of western classical criticism *ut pictura poesis,* that is, that painting and poetry are alike [Hwang]. By means of visual illustrations, the author revealed that Chinese poetry for the most part represents life from a number of varying viewpoints rather than from the fixed perspective ordinarily associated with western art and poetry. This multiple perspective may be interpreted as both a means of concentrating on a central object or as a method for creating an overall impression without attention to specific details. A further paper suggested that the highly graphic effect of some of the verse of Ezra Pound is achieved through the juxtaposition of archetypal nouns, leading to both obscurity and discontinuity [Walther].

This element of discontinuity was treated in a remarkably parallel exposition of the narrative style of the Chinese novel *The Golden Cangue* [Lucien Miller]. This particular style is spatial form, which was characterized as a development "in modern fiction and poetry whereby techniques are used to subvert sequence, chronology and the linear flow of words," thereby creating a synchronic rather than diachronic thrust through the juxtaposition of elements.

Another general theme not apparent in the titles of particular papers was that of the self and the non-self. In connection with *The Woman Warrior,* I have already alluded to the tension established between the ethnicity of the protagonist and her American self [Ling]. It was also pointed out in regard to the same novel that traditionally in China the self is part of the community, but there is "little consciousness of self as a unique unrepeatable phenomenon who desires to endure as an individual in memory" [Lucien Miller]. Yet classical Chinese poetry, we were elsewhere told, has been classified into two types, that of "a world with I (self)" and the other of "a world without I (self)" [Hwang]. Also a textbook in English on the Japanese haiku explains that the state of mind of the poet represents "conditions of *selflessness* in which things are seen without reference to profit or loss, even of some remote, spiritual kind" [Kodama]. The speaker

on Narcissism described a situation in which the self before a mirror and the reflected self reject each other. The self in the mirror does not believe the self outside, and the poet has no place for his identity either inside or outside [Moon].

The dichotomy between self and non-self resembles that between the actual world and the world of dreams, a contrast which is noticed nearly always in regard to *The Dream of the Red Chamber,* and this conference was no exception. One paper cited the paradox by the author of the Dream:

> Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true,
> Real becomes not real when the unreal's real. [Wang]

The paper on *The Golden Cangue* quoted a passage from that novel in which the narrator asks "What is real and what is false?" [Lucien Miller]. And the student of Korean aestheticism cited a novel which made him recollect Oscar Wilde's artistic credo that life should imitate art.

These diverse examples of thematology are for the most part original and significant, supplementing as they do the western student's habitual stock of characters, situations, and attitudes.

I should like at this point to conclude my remarks on a personal note. Apparently I have become somewhat of a historical rarity as one of the few persons who has attended all four of the comparative literature conferences at Tamkang University. At the first meeting in 1971, I was asked to perform the same task of recapitulation which I am honored to carry out today. All of the Americans at this first meeting chose one of their number to express their appreciation to their hosts for the many courtesies and kindnesses shown to them during the period of the conference. At this time I should like to offer myself as a spokesman for the guests of the present conference and to express our gratitude to our hosts and organizers for their generosity and warm hospitality. The logistics have been impeccable, and everything possible has been done to make every guest welcome and comfortable. It is impossible to single out each one of the many workers and organizers who have contributed to the success of this memorable conference, but I feel obliged to indicate my personal indebtedness to Professor Daniel Lin, Professor Ch'iu lang Chi, Vice President Limin Chu, and President Clement C. P. Chang.

It would be a mistake, however, to limit words of appreciation to merely the superb amenities, including lodging, food and wine, which have been

furnished in a lavish style. The pioneer contribution of Tamkang University and the Republic of China in helping to establish comparative literature on a truly international basis must not go unrecognized. So far as I am aware, the original gathering of twelve years ago was the first international conference held anywhere in the world which treated comparative literature from a truly universal perspective and which was widely attended by speakers from Europe, Asia and the United States. Previous conferences, even those under the aegis of the International Comparative Literature Association, were openly Eurocentered. More recent congresses of the ICLA have become more universal in scope, but the pioneering work in the Republic of China must not on that account be lost to sight or to recognition. I trust that all of the present participants from other parts of the world will continue to bear in mind the major contribution which Tamkang University and the Republic of China have made to promoting the truly universal character of our discipline of comparative literature.