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COMPARATIVE LITERATURE: EAST

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比较文学：东方与西方

Department of Comparative Literature
Institute of Comparative Literature
Sichuan University, China



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Contents

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Tom Cohn

- Critical Climate Change—Minority Report on
21st Century Western Studies.....1

Péter Hajdu

- Literature and National Identity..... 11

Timothy C. Wong

- “On Its Own Terms”: Butterfly-Saturday Fiction
in the *Xiaoshuo* Tradition.....17

CHINESE PERSPECTIVES

Cao, Shunqing

- The Discourse of Chinese Literary Theory and the Dialogue between
Western Literary Theory and the Chinese Literary Theory.....31

Yan, Du

- “The Fire and the Rose Are One”: the Dantesque Purification of
Language in T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding”48

Duan, Lian

- The Poetic World of *Jing*: A Study of Chinese Poetics
from Western Perspectives.....55

Yuan, Xin

- An Old Issue, the New Challenge: From Sidney to Shelley.....72

CULTUREL THEORY AND MODERNITY

Ma, Rui

- The Rise of Literary Criticism as a Modern Discipline in China..... 80

Xu, Pei

- Landscape and Its Representation in
Early Modern Chinese Pictorials: 1884—1937.....85

Wang, Xiaolu

Cultural Theory and Multi-Modernity

—A Study of Key Words in Cultural Theory as a Case.....99

ETHNIC LITERATURE STUDIES

Jiang, Xinxin

Transcending “the Bluest Eye”: An Analysis of

Toni Morrison’s *Body Beauty*107

Ren, Wen

Esperanza’s Home Is in Her Heart.....113

Rong, Guo

A Dialogue between Different Voices: A Tentative Interpretation

of Ha Jin’s “In Broad Daylight”120

TRANSLATION STUDIES

Jia, Liu

On Postcolonial Perspectives in Translation Studies.....134

Luo, Lie

Translating New Woman—The Different Images of Portia

in the Translated Literature in Early Twentieth-century China.....138

Yu, Zhengjing

Differentiations and Transformations Existed in the English Translation

of *Tao Te Ching*145

EDITOR’S NOTES.....152

Critical Climate Change—Minority Report

on 21st Century Western Studies

Tom Cohn

State University of New York

中文摘要:本文论述了21世纪西方的文化研究中出现的转向:从“他者的他者性”向“全然他者”的转向。这种转向不仅同全球“气候变化”有关,还同体制自身内部的转变有关。作者首先针对中国学者提出的“另类现代性”阐明了自己的观点,接着具体阐述了当今文化研究中的新动向,认为这同“后民主时代”的政治转向密不可分,标志着传统文化研究模式的终结,转向对“伦理”、“人权”和“技术”的关注,极大地改变了人们对当今“全球”现状的理解,体现出对“全然他者”的关注。作为文化批判的人文学科,显然应该直面人类自身的弱点和局限性。最后,作者对新的文化研究提出了几点初步设想,并附带提出了新的研究视野中的文本阅读和“理论消费”问题。

I want to situate a shift in Western “cultural studies”, if we can invoke that as the name for a 20th century project exploring the construction of social identity within shifting contexts of power and positioning. Let us call it the site at which it gives birth to its other: I will call this a shift from the original import of cultural studies—that, let us say, in accounting for the “otherness of the other”, of the human other, that is—to what we can call the “wholly other”. We can relate this not only to something called “climate change”, an interpenetration and mutation of archival systems, but to a *mutation* we may anticipate today, for purposes of discussion and otherwise, in the archive itself.

If “cultural studies” represents in the end the gathering point of humanistic research cast as a historicizing project (including the historicization of the “present” as popular culture, identity politics, and so on), the shift I want to point to implies a rupture within that model itself—or the wars that, in one way or another, invisible and explicit, are promised around this site today.

It is common to hear various Chinese colleagues suggesting China was not yet *postmodern*, that it required a category of its own—perhaps, an “alternative modernity”, or one, at best, that could redistribute its socialist ideals in a different model than the homogenization of the “global” consumer order. I owe to Professor Wang Fengzhen this tantalizing question, posed at an international conference on modernity in Shanghai recently: what “alternative modernities” can be conceived today. To an American, you have to know, China is well beyond postmodern, traversed by a montage of times, some future to what we call America certainly—its “modernity” is newer, as is its city and, perhaps, subjectivities. One is aware too of some ironies in the faulted mirror between the two. I am not alluding to the curious narrative of America in decline and China rising, as if we pass like ships in opposite directions today (if so, we may be a warning), as if the historical chance of the Ming emperor’s move to Beijing from the coast—deciding China’s turn inward for centuries—were exceeded by that of Bush’s unorthodox “election”, and its implications for the next centuries (denial of “global warming”, drift to a klepto-mediocratic one-party state, and so on). The American left, vaporized by the neutralization of the political, may seek in China some mothership of the socialist project, while the Chinese critic may, on the contrary, be looking from America for some different catalyst that would transform its “materialist” traditions. So to ask after an “alternative modernity” in the sense of one that pulls out of the fast food shops and consumer labels, as if in mourning, risks today a measure of alternative nostalgia—like “old” temples or mountain villages simulated in Disney fashion for cognitive tourism.

I will briefly outline the following hypothesis: that the *alternative modernities* one questions, today, may have to do less with communities one can oppose to the homogenization of the “global”, a nostalgic exercise, than with certain ruptures in the “present” collectively coming from a sort of “outside” to the narratives that preoccupy humanistic studies. I will call these the *X-factors* of the “post-global” order—the non-anthropomorphic announcement of “global warming”, the production of an underclass of “disposable” humans, the prospect of water and oil wars, biodiversity collapse, and so on (the list is becoming familiar). And I will try to relate this, briefly, to what I see as the horizon for Western critical culture going into the 21st century where, here and there, there are signs of a mutation underway that may be of interest, and require the engagement, of Chinese thinkers and scholars.

The state of Western critical theory is deceptively placid on its surface entering this new century—the expert working out of the legacies of the transformative projects of

twentieth century thought (the master-thinkers of “post-structuralism”, say) with the quiet hegemony of “global” cultural studies settling into place. Yet there is also a sense of being at the end of a cycle, and the settling in of a spell cast over the post-“9/11” horizon that some have called a post-political horizon (the renegade Lacanian Slavoj Žižek calls it “global gridlock”). If I offer a “minority report” on this—and I am thinking of Philip K. Dick’s story as well as Spielberg’s film, where future crimes would be pre-empted by three Sensors, a time-loop mastered by a “society of control” (Deleuze), except when there is a minority report, an objection from one of the three—it is as a partial survey of where there are cracks in this facade or where new borders are being probed, mutations prepared for.

It is difficult to separate this horizon from the perception of a political shift in the West, a mediocratic totalization which the deconstructive theorist J. Hillis Miller referenced recently in Wuhan as the inauguration of a “post-democratic” era. The journal *Parallax* dedicated a recent issue to *Mourning Revolution*—that is, what occurs to critical thinking in the absence of this attendant prospect, the dawn of an image-culture that is totalizing (like a “war on terror” without temporal or geographic horizons, a spectral war). Gayatri Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline* reflects on the closure of “comparative literature” as an institutional space of cultural translation (turning to service “global” literature in translation as sound-bytes of “others”), turning in the end to a notion of the “planetary” that remains undefined. Mike Hill’s *After Whiteness* speculates on the closure of “race” studies as identitarian politics in “America”, breaking with the cultural studies’ model by speculating on the disappearance of whiteness a normative or real site in daily life. Inverting the protocols of a declining “cognitive empire”, Avital Ronell’s *Stupidity* raises that mute topos to an agency of resistance in literary and philosophic tradition. Samuel Weber’s *Targets of Opportunity* attempts to redirect attention to the confluence of mass media with war in the context of, while Henry Sussman’s *Task of the Critic* attempts to re-read deconstruction as a materialist transformation of the memory systems of the monotheistic epoch. Of course, cultural studies had long absorbed figures remapping the definition of the “human”, the body, gender, and so on, with figures of the post-human (Kathleen Hayles), cyborgs and trans-species speculations (Donna Haraway), yet such figures failed to find more than metaphoric acceptance. In shifts like that of Giorgio Agamben to the “biopolitical” (*Homo Sacer*), the ritual and legal construction of the *bios* itself—and the non-human—is probed, drawing on Walter Benjamin and with reference the Nazi death camps, yet it does so in a manner that elicits accusation of political nihilism from the

now traditional left for departing from any possible class struggle or capitalist narrative (Ernesto Laclau). Agamben, who implies that the “world wars” of the last century were potential preludes to a totalization “globally” underway, locates his history exclusively in the West—but shifts the figure of the “political” to an extra-human category: the *bios*. Hardt and Negri’s influential *Empire* attempted to revitalize the communist theoretic project, selectively activating Foucault and translating the “masses” into a virtual “multitude” (anticipating nanotechnic horizons)—but the intermix of dazzling nomad insights with resurrected 19th century metaphors (as the term “empire” itself suggests) can seem to operate as a literary provocation engineered by a desperate utopian surge. It is that “utopianism” that finds itself virtually mourned for, in melancholy fashion, in the great Marxian critic Fredric Jameson’s *Archaeology of the Future*—whose title ironizes its dilemma, that of finding a refuge for an article of faith, that of imaging a “future” through the montage of the past. Thus when Jameson evokes Benjamin’s *weak messianism* as a form of the “Messianic”, or denies to Philip K. Dick a dystopian vision (which can only be for Jameson a variant of the utopic), a lapse or willed assertion occurs that plays itself out as a regression to a form of allegory that is pre-Benjaminian—that is, that understands allegory as representational (“modernist”) rather than as what, as in Benjamin’s “materialistic historiography” itself, negates and transforms the memory programs out of which the act derives, and with it virtual “pasts” and alternative “futures”. One might see the turn towards *ethics* (always of “the other”) and that more recently to “human rights” as the theoretical corollary to the cultural studies dilemma—pressed to its limits, “human rights” is not about geopolitical critique but the impasse of how the “human” is even legally constructed today—or what remains behind that fiction. (An excellent collection on this appeared in the journal *SAQ*, Spring/Summer 2004, edited by Ian Balfour and Eduardo Cadava.) But the turn toward technics and technicity, here, has paradoxically been the more disruptive—as what is probed is not where technologies are used or even transform social space and memory but of the implications of a technicity that precedes memory, the senses, perception for which there is no representational marker. This has led to interrogations of so-called *transliteracy* (Alan Liu) between the era of the Book and that of digitalization as well *The Philosophy of New Media* (a book by Mark Hansen), as well as to interrogations of image culture and, on a nanological level, speculation on the end of an alphabetic writing culture—with which the era of monotheism in the West is associated—before a digital mutation. It has also given rise to genealogies of the image, such as interrogations of how cinema instituted new cognitive templates—

and where this can be read today as an installed form of memory influencing the categories of war, reference, consumption, the eye, and so on. (I attempted a work in this direction in the two volume interrogation of *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies*, using "Hitchcock's" oeuvre as a cipher.) In a recent volume on 21st Century Criticism edited by Julian Wolfreys, I contributed a closing essay titled "(A)materiality", where I speculated on whether "other materialities" will need to be accessed in the coming horizon than those given us by dialectical or classic philosophic models.

To shift from a 20th century project to a 21st century critical horizon has even threatened to open a new field, that of "*future studies*", as if what we call the archive itself were inverted here, and anteriority flipped forward. Something in the contract to time has radically altered.

Our construction of a "global" present is suddenly recast as a time-bubble or, more interestingly, redistributed by what I will call the "post-global" non-*secret*. Derrida used to speak of the power of the secret—but there is also the non-secret, totalizing, obese, everywhere evident. It is the one nonetheless glaring on the media suddenly in America, following a near white-out for several years due to the Bush manipulation of the war on terror and corporate media—the specter of a string of terrestrial limits that pose a geological timeline of mutations in a calculable future.

A columnist for the New Yorker magazine recently observed that, after a whiteout in media by Bush, "climate change" was having its "mass-entertainment moment". Suddenly there are a flood of references, opinion columns, cartoon movies, disaster films, and so on. Today just by browsing, one encounters a New York Times' column warning of a new surprise—the giant methane ice on the ocean floors that, when warmed, erupt into the atmosphere (raising temperatures, last time, 13 degrees), a PBS documentary on "global dimming" (the surprise that we can't get rid of air pollution, now, since it helps cool us and would raise and accelerate "global warming", even if it poisons health; and yet another on the "6th extinction", the human-induced extinction of the majority of wild life forms by this century. There are ads for back to back CNN specials—one called "Meltdown" and another title capitalizing on the pleasure of guilt and punishment: "We were warned"), as well as for a network movie on "Bird Flu in America", a pro-active anticipation of mass death and anarchy.

These intrusions have a certain mass-entertainment value, but it is not that of the disaster movie. The report on geological and biomorphic time-lines framed as urgently educational (usually there are "tipping points" identified), knowing full well none of whatever they have in mind can or will be done. The mode of the warning is perhaps

past pluperfect conditional. So without knowing it they imply a kind of a joke: this is what's happening, and we will pretend it's a warning, a public service, but in fact nothing will happen and it's too late (glacial meltoff, say). The projections are rather nasty, and I don't endorse these at all—but they include by way of accelerated feedback loops inundated coasts, erased cities, predicted drought, the prospect of oil or water wars, perhaps locally nuclear, or what one suppressed Department of Defense report predicts as “population” culling—we see it today, in the indifference to Darfur or the Pakistani Quake, or the abandoned of New Orleans, or the consolidation of a virtual subspecies of “disposable” humans, already culled for body organs and so on. In this time-bubble, or at its limit, America will no longer be “America” (five percent of the world's population consuming twenty-five percent of its energy and material), nor can China pursue that model (autos for all its population). It is Chinese scientists who recently observed the meltoff of the Tibetan ice-sheet now is predictable, with catastrophic desertification of Asian rivers (the Ganges, the Yangtze), obliterating droughts and duststorms and so on.

These are the X-factors of the “post-global”—since they propose a site of inversion not of this or that political agenda (class struggle as such), but to the species. Hence the other component of this rhetoric—basically forming a bizarre or negative contract to a virtual futures. Children and the unborn are invoked, and on a recent commercial featuring a train bearing down on a man who steps aside, to reveal his daughter still in the way of the train, and so on. In this scenario, “cultural studies” shifts from its declared topos, *the otherness of the (human) other* (as if all these positions were now placed on one side of a binary map), to what we can call for the moment the “wholly other”. Which arrives in the form of New Orleans' floods, or bird flu, or biodiversity collapse.

The movement from a focus on the “otherness of the other”—with all its regressive eddies as we know, the drift into identitarian politics, the fetishization of the “minor”, the cultivation of victimology—to that of a “wholly other” that is also, as trace, *technic*, leads in numerous directions.

It was Masao Myoshi a few years back who perhaps first posed a question of a “planetary” crisis that would suspend the model of the political as practiced before a situation after which there would be nothing “for any of us.” In “Turn to the Planet: Literature, Diversity & Totality” he argues: “Perhaps we need a new organization, one that is truly global and inclusive as all. There is one such core site for organizing such an inclusiveness, though entirely negative at present: the future of the global

environment” (295). He called for a “planetary” reorientation of the human community, but could not envision that (it is left for others) nor proceed without insisting on a utopian resolution that would include all, still, all the utopian premises. The problem—and this goes for the narcissism of a certain identity politics, a vicarious reconstruction of the otherness of the human other—is that, with these collapses of infrastructure, the rules will change once the pressure is on (as the abandonment of New Orleans demonstrates), when survival calculations take over, control is centralized, and the agendas of social justice and “human rights” are eclipsed by other priorities?

Now, the import of bringing this up, though it is but a media dependent event or report, is that the so-called “present” is traversed by other histories—such as the “geological”, “biological” and “socio-linguistic” nonlinear histories Manuel de Landa presents, void of individual human narratives, along the line of interactive dynamics and what he calls “biomass” or “stuff” (“Over the millennia, it is the flow of bio-mass through food webs, as well as the flow of genes through generations, that matters, not the bodies and species that emerge from these flows.... This book has concerned itself with a historical survey of these flows of ‘stuff,’ as well as with the hardenings themselves” (259)). De Landa’s counter-history identifies with an agency that shapes itself in and out of life-forms and terrestrial formations, through mutating and nonlinear feedback or “catalytic loops” (citing Maruyama) and lateral migrations (“much as a given *material* may solidify in alternative ways (as ice or snowflakes, as crystal or glass), so humanity liquefied and later solidified in different norms” (6)). De Landa finds this combination of Braudel and Deleuze impossible to return to any narrative of “capital” itself—since the forces at work deploy that as an organizing and stratifying agent: “What use is there in making this move, if we are to crown the whole exercise with a return to the great master concept, the great homogenization involved in the notion of a ‘capitalist system’?” (267)

One sees the limit of the “otherness of the other”—perhaps of the deadend of “ethics” in its current form—when Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* explores that of the “terrorist” other as a site where “face” is given (or not), identified with (or against), at the limit of face itself (transposed from Levinas). The discourse is mounted as a problematic of who is mourned, the politics of mourning, and is absorbed by this gesture—to the point of having no broader reference to the biopolitical impasse the explored scene (after “9/11”) heralds (which we might use “Katerina” as the poster of instead). But at the limit of this inquiry is precisely a negotiated backloop to a human order: “If the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a

task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense.” (151) The shift from the facade of a spectral war on terror, without horizon in time or geography, yet still featuring the human face as enemy other (Osama, Saddam) to the open wound of New Orleans’ flood—inundated from without, traversed by diverse histories (of oil, of militarization of the “homeland”, of climate change) and futures (the rehearsal for a triage of the underclass)—appears that from the “otherness of the other” to a “wholly other”. New Orleans opens a gash in the entire archive to say nothing of the “homeland” itself. If, as Derrida argued, the American response to “9/11” represented a “suicidal auto-immunitary process”, in which the evisceration of the “homeland” would be accelerated in its supposed defense (attacking its own “immune” system, in this trope), New Orleans represents a lateral acceleration before a site that cannot be appropriated (“war on terror”), a hole in the symbolic fabric, without face.

I have, in a sense, turned to ask what the “future” of 21st century studies may be, if it is not only to concern itself with the “political” models we have inherited, with the endless sketching of an “otherness of the (human) other” whose premise seems to be generating its own other—shifting from a “humanistic” model to something else.

Let us call this, for the moment, an absent new “head,” since it has not arrived and will not in any messianic form, a sort of acapital, and let us assume one of the burdens of this situation, which is in other ways interesting, is to move beyond the model of “mourning” itself, of recovery, of the house or homeland provincially understood—since these programs themselves are linked, one must deduce, to the same machine of acceleration. The fact that “cultural studies” has never been more sophisticated, experimental, and inclusive, yet that the practices that claimed to guard the “political” projects of today have arrived sleepwalking and quarantined within the new dispensation—what is called, in some places, a post-political era—suggests a redistribution, today, of where the political may have migrated to cognitive orders, to coming wars over the re-inscription of the earth itself.

Given more time, or different times, I would suggest the following as a few, modest lines initiatives in this scenario, perhaps a bit utopian:

—That, in this scene, what we call the “political” will have migrated from a social category, as it has always been defined, to an cognitive or epistemographic one—that is, to shifts in the prerecordings or inscriptions from which our “present” seems both accelerated and entranced;

—That that the era of the Book must be seen as but a major episode in the history of

tele-technics;

—That, if one writes now as if from after the catastrophe as well (the X-factors), from a perspective of non-anthropomorphic and systemic shifts to come, one does so from a position beyond mourning, or the rituals of personification, “identification”, and so, which is to say with an eye toward a mutation to come, indeed, to the coming wars of reinscription of the “earth” which will be decided in the 21st century.

There is an important supplement to de Landa’s volume in the work of Bernard Stiegler, the French thinker of technics, who in a recent article titled “Nanomutation” addresses where “the convergence of technologies of matter, information, and living entities” discloses a rethinking of “man” from the perspective of the technology of memory. De Landa’s treatment of “linguistic” history was merely socio-linguistic accounts of language mutation, not how the orders of what may be called inscriptions govern perception, time, habits of consumption (or the media homogenization that looms today. Stiegler—who addresses “*technologies of the spirit*” —locates de Landa’s “biomass” or “stuff” in what Foucault identifies with Plato as *hypomnemata*, the “copy-books” of cultural prerecordings out of which the “world” is generated for man. Interestingly, two openings can be said to occur at this horizon. First, the necessity of active reading of texts and media becomes the more relevant (so take heart, textualists), if there is to be a reinscription of the archival premises of 21st century agency—the example of the very small agencies of nanotechnology is put into play by Stiegler. But the second is of more interest, perhaps, to Chinese scholars, who have found themselves what Liu Kang speaks of as “theory consumers” of Western projects. Stiegler observes, as does the mathematical theorist Brian Rotman, that one is coming out of the era of monotheism that was bound to the invention of the alphabet—and that the digital era stands to recast the epistemological and cognitive premises of this thousands-year parenthesis. There is something striking in suggesting that Western critical culture, entering the 21st century, is also shaped at its limits by a monotheistic spell, still resonantly Christian and messianic (which may include, via Hegel, forms of Marxism as well), and that this is bound to its writing system. And this may be why this project seems to wait for a supplement from without—perhaps from an awakening culture whose ancient thought traditions precisely did not occur in this “Western” fold, was not monotheistic (or onto-theological), was not alphabetically shaped, and harbor modes of thinking and experience that do not recognize the same limits or, for that matter, death drive.

Tom Cohn received his M.A. from the University of Chicago and Ph.D. in comparative literature from Yale University. He was a senior Fulbright Scholar of American Studies and Literary Theory in Sri Nakarinirot University. And he served as Chair, Department of English, University at Albany and Chair, Division on Philosophical Approaches to Literature, MLA. Currently he is professor of Literary, Critical, and Media Studies at University at Albany, SUNY, Department of English. His recent publications include *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies*. University of Minnesota Press, 2005.