

Reading East Asian Writing

The limits of literary theory

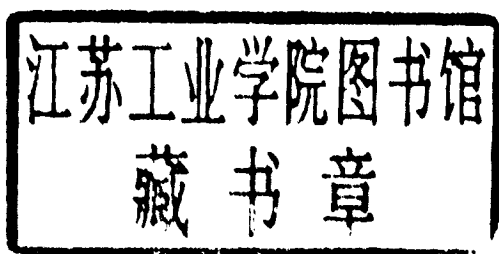
Edited by Michel Hockx and Ivo Smits



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The Editors

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INTRODUCTION

IVO SMITS AND MICHEL HOCKX

The thirteen chapters in this collection originate from papers presented at a workshop held at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London in the summer of 1999. SOAS, with its unique triple institutional focus on languages, area studies and disciplines, provided a most appropriate setting for our gathering. We planned to present a variety of theoretical approaches available within our discipline, the study of literature, and to discuss our individual appropriations of those approaches. At the same time we intended to deal with literatures produced in areas and written in languages which were often not taken into account by those who formulated the theories.

The two specific literatures we investigated, Chinese and Japanese, are often grouped together in the curricula of 'East Asian' departments in universities all over the world. In terms of research and publication, however, these two literatures are rarely studied together, and the abundance of 'East Asian literature' courses taught in Western universities is matched only by a dearth of textbooks and studies available to teach them in a truly comparative manner.

Our main aim, therefore, in bringing together the work of theoretically inspired scholars of Chinese and Japanese literature was to make some practical contributions: to enhance communication between scholars working on these two often very closely related literatures, to discuss common concerns about the appropriate use of theory, and to provide comparative perspectives to students in need of readings. There is no single argument or idea underlying all the contributions to this volume. The unity that these chapters represent is a unity of purpose: to initiate an open and inclusive debate about theories and methods among scholars of East Asian literature.

As far as this book is concerned, the emphasis is very much on inclusiveness. We have refused to limit our definition of 'theory' to 'contemporary Western theory'. Chapters 6 and 7 were written from the perspective of traditional philology, an approach which, though these days often trendily disparaged, has maintained and developed remarkably consistent methods over the course of many centuries. Through their scrutiny of the body of traditional literary criticism for instance, in the form of commentaries, that Chinese and Japanese literati have produced, these philological studies at times achieve what might be called a meta-theoretical

perspective. A similar perspective is achieved in Chapters 3 and 4, which show how fashionable Western theories, by the likes of Barthes, Derrida and Kristeva, have been inspired and shaped by the theorists' (mis)understanding of East Asian languages and cultures. Rather than providing case studies of 'applications' of a particular method to a particular culture, these four chapters show that method and culture are often inextricably intertwined.

Beyond its practical aims, then, this collection will hopefully serve in many ways as a reminder of the limits of literary theory as it is commonly defined. At a fundamental level the whole notion of 'literary theory', as a professional scholarly discourse about unique texts by unique people, is strongly indebted to the Western modernist tradition. It is good to remember that European and North American cultural practices are just as tradition-specific as those of China and Japan. It is even better to remember that this is a reason to rejoice: where universality ends, communication begins. Apart from the four chapters mentioned above, which explicitly tackle the specificity of the cultural behaviour of Chinese, Japanese and European intellectuals, many of the other chapters revolve around the authors' earnest examination of their own behaviour. Each in their own way, the authors of these chapters have asked themselves the same, crucial question: why is it that I like to use a particular theory or approach, and how does it interact with the texts I read? It is in those self-reflexive moments that the boundaries between text and theory, and between China and Japan, dissolve.

Despite this attempt to operate at the 'meta-level', there remains, as said above, much that is tradition-specific in both Chinese and Japanese literature. It is therefore necessary for this Introduction to present, as succinctly as possible, an overview of the history of the two literatures, and of the various ways in which they have been and are being studied, to lay the groundwork for the individual explorations that are to follow.

WRITING, LITERATURE AND THE CHINESE TRADITION

There are two reasons why the title of this book highlights the term 'writing', rather than the word 'literature'. First and foremost, this is because speaking of 'literature', or *wenxue* in Chinese, or *bungaku* in Japanese, already signals participation in twentieth-century Western-inspired discourses and definitions. The concept is indigenous neither to China nor to Japan, and using it to stake out one's research territory invites methodological problems which, in view of the fundamental questions raised above, we were keen to avoid at least in the title of our collection, although we do use it, in the broadest possible sense, in this Introduction.

Secondly, the emphasis on written texts, as opposed to oral or performed texts, reflects the high status of writing in both cultures. In China, especially, the body of texts which most closely resembles that which in the West would be called a 'literary canon' consists of writings by members of a societal elite whose every uttered word, as soon as it was written down, was considered worth preserving. For many centuries, this ever-growing canon, like any other canon, functioned as a pillar of society: it underpinned the elite's moral philosophies and aesthetic tastes, it structured systems of education and (government) recruitment and it provided a massive target for so-called 'counter-traditions'. In one way or another, this canon of writing survived until the early twentieth century, when a new, partly Western-educated intellectual elite declared it outdated and politically incorrect, abolished the classical language and all of its literary genres and embarked on a hazardous road of modernization and cultural displacement.

The paragraph above was easy to write because it follows a familiar framework that has shaped many overview histories of Chinese literature. In essence there is nothing wrong with this framework: the vast rupture with tradition that much modern Chinese literature represents inevitably highlights, in retrospect, the remarkable continuity that some traditional literary forms and poetical views enjoyed throughout a written tradition of a few thousand years. But neither traditional Chinese writing nor modern Chinese literature is really the kind of overpowering cultural Molochs that they sometimes appear to be. Both contain a plethora of tensions and ambiguities of the kind that methodical inquiry, of whatever theoretical persuasion, is often apt to discover.

The canon of Chinese writing is held to consist of four parts (*bu*): the classics (*jing*), the philosophers (*zi*), the histories (*shi*) and the collections (*ji*). The five classics are very old texts, whose authorship is traditionally ascribed to Confucius. They are a collection of documentary, lyrical, spiritual and ritual writings that were long hailed as the absolute standards of good writing and proper morals. The writings of the philosophers, mostly dating from the first centuries of the Christian era, represent attempts to explicate and systematize the classics into distinct schools of thought. The histories, continuously produced throughout the imperial era, documented the governance of each ruler of each dynasty, administering 'praise and blame' according to the example of one of the five classics, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*). These three categories, emphasizing the role of writing as the most perfect embodiment of moral virtue, correct behaviour and good governance, co-existed, at times uncomfortably, with the fourth category, which contained all the genres of poetic and prose writing actually practised by individual literati throughout the ages. Although many of those writings looked towards the other three categories for inspiration and

guidance, they also developed their own standards of formal beauty and aesthetic expression. Much of the classical Chinese literature, especially poetry, that is still appreciated and anthologized nowadays was written by individual talents who were at least as committed to art as they were to morality. At the same time, however, the utilitarian discourse surrounding classical Chinese literature has not disappeared in the modern period. Until the present day, the vast majority of educated Chinese readers consider any kind of reading of a literary text that does *not* take into account the personality of the author and the socio-political context to be utterly fallacious.

Related to this dynamic equilibrium between artistry and morality in the Chinese literary tradition is the relationship between what might be called 'serious literature' and 'trivial literature'. Within the fourfold framework outlined above, there was traditionally no room for any writing that was overtly fictional. Nevertheless, fictional writing, originating from the Buddhist counter-tradition and from urban-based oral performances, grew rapidly in popularity as printing technology, invented in China, became more widespread from about the eleventh century onwards. After the economic boom during the late Ming period (late sixteenth/early seventeenth century), the publishing of fiction, especially novels, became big business and attracted the attention and active, if often somewhat apologetic, involvement of many members of the literati elite. The study of the complex distribution of political, economic *and* cultural capital between the traditional elite and a rising merchant class with elite aspirations during the late Ming period has in recent years proved to be a very fruitful area of research. In the consensus that is slowly emerging, the boundaries between 'serious' and 'trivial' literature appear to be increasingly permeable, so that here, too, formerly rigid divisions have been replaced by a more dynamic picture. Meanwhile, some entirely different dynamics were shaping the development of traditional Japanese literature.

THE JAPANESE LITERARY TRADITION AND THE CHINESE LEGACY

The history of Japanese written literature is certainly not as old as that of China. The oldest extant texts that may be regarded as somehow 'literary', in the sense that they aim to be more than merely a date or the description of an item, were collected in the early eighth century. However, the history of Japanese literature certainly compensates in variety for what it may lack in antiquity compared to its neighbour. For one thing, Japanese literature has for a very long time been bilingual. Since 'literature' is here conceived of as writing, and writing as a system was imported by the Japanese from the

Asian mainland, written Japanese literature was from its inception composed in Chinese and not so very long afterwards also in Japanese. This led to a long-lasting and ever-changing dynamic between languages, textual domains and readerships. It is only in the past two decades or so that scholars really have begun to recapture the lost world of Chinese texts in Japan (*kanbun*) and its relation to literature in Japanese. With the rise of the school of *kokugaku*, or national learning, in the late eighteenth century, the bias against Chinese as a foreign language grew steadily and was consolidated in the late nineteenth century by the establishment of *kangaku* or 'Chinese studies' as an academic field devoted to texts from China and *kokubungaku* (national literature studies) as a field dealing with texts in Japanese. The result came close to an institutional neglect of *kanbun* as a language of Japan's cultural and literary heritage.

One effect of this dynamics of language was that, in the Heian period (974–1192), narrative texts in Japanese, memoirs (*nikki*) as well as fictional tales (*monogatari*), were produced mostly by women. In fact, Japan has often been singled out as a culture in which vernacular fiction was created by women, not by men. It is a phenomenon that still raises many intriguing questions about the relationship between language and audiences, and gender and literature.

Another dynamic at work in the classic period was Japan's ongoing negotiation with its cultural heritage from China in shaping its own distinct traditions. The rhetoric of early poetic treatises, for example, borrowed heavily from Chinese concepts in their attempts to raise the status of *waka* (poetry in Japanese) to an equal of Chinese verse (*kanshi*). That is not to say that Chinese notions of poetry's forms and functions were borrowed wholesale. Rather, Japan selected what seemed useful for its own purposes and soon 'China' had become a construct that had little to do with the state across the East China Sea. Scholars speak of 'a China within Japan' to indicate Japanese perceptions of China and their role in using or disabusing elements in moulding tradition to fit current ideas of literature. The very term invented in the Meiji period (1868–1912) for 'literature' (*bungaku*) is perhaps the most succinct example, taken from ancient Chinese texts where it meant 'scholarship' or 'the study of letters'; in turn, it reached China as *wenxue*, bringing this new twist to the continent.

Another difference with China is Japan's easy recognition of fiction as a high form of literature and poetry as a literary domain where for a long time men and women were fairly equal contenders. Fiction took many forms as Japan gradually moved from the classic to the medieval and literature saw a broadening of the physical and social landscape. Both protagonists and producers of texts moved beyond the boundaries of court circles. By the sixteenth century there was a proliferation of war tales and short tales

(*sōshi*), but also the consolidation of *nō* theatre as well as different poetic forms, from the traditional *waka* to linked verse (*renga*), which were practised not only by courtiers or elite warriors but also by commoners. This last development was accelerated in the Edo period (1600–1868) with the emergence of a culture of townspeople. A rise in literacy combined with the hub of cities eager for texts resulted in new forms of theatre (*jōruri*, *kabuki*), poetry (*haikai*, *senryū*) and fiction (*ukiyo-zōshi*, *gesaku*) that all twisted and recombined even further Japan's cultural legacy and uses of the ever-present 'China within Japan'.

JAPANESE LITERATURE ENTERING MODERNITY

If one wishes to pursue the idea that written literature in Japan started with Chinese writing, then one could with equal brashness say that modern writing started with Japan's confrontation with nineteenth-century Western literature. For poetry, some might point at August 1882 as a starting date, when a group of young academics published *Shintaishi shō* (Selection of New Style Poetry), a small anthology that contained not only Japanese translations of Longfellow and Tennyson, but also a few original free verses (*shi*) by Japanese. Three years later the critic and Shakespeare translator Tsubouchi Shōyō published his legendary essay *Shōsetsu shinzui* (Essence of the Novel), in which he made a case for 'modern' (meaning naturalistic) works of literature in a European mode. And when Futabata Shimei started publishing the first part of *Ukigumo* (Drifting Cloud) the following year, it was felt that Japan had met the expectations of literary reformers by presenting them with a modern novel (*shōsetsu*) and a new cultural hero, lethargic and self-absorbed and partly modelled after Russian literary anti-heroes. What certainly made the Meiji novel modern was its attempt to 'write the spoken language' (*genbun itchi*) and its rejection of the literary language that had dominated writing for so long. A major genre to make use of the new language was the introspective genre of the *shisōsetsu* (the translation of which as 'I-novel' is being debated by some scholars).

The idea that the Japanese converted from 'pre-modern' to 'modern' literature in less than five years cannot be taken seriously, nor is the shock of encountering texts from the West very satisfying as the sole explanation of modernity's beginnings. As a grand narrative of literary history the idea was certainly tempting, if only because of the looming, deterministic parallel with the country's rapid transformation in the second half of the nineteenth century from a relatively isolated and 'feudalistic' state to an industrializing modern nation-state. However, the debt owed by the novel of the Meiji era to narrative fiction of the later Edo period as well as doubts

about the validity of regarding Edo Japan as a completely self-contained culture, have placed the undeniable catalyst role of Western literature in perspective.

MODERN CHINESE WRITING AND THE LINK WITH JAPAN

If understanding modernity in Japanese literature requires a double perspective, i.e. not just looking to the West but also looking back, any attempt to characterize modern Chinese literature necessitates a triple vantage point: to the West, to the Chinese tradition, and to Japan. The advent of the modern in Chinese writing has often been equated with the introduction of the modern vernacular (*baihua*) by a group of Beijing University-based foreign-educated intellectuals, led by Hu Shi, in the late 1910s. Hu did not directly acknowledge any influence from the Japanese *genbun itchi* movement and preferred to credit his readings about the European Renaissance with providing him with the crucial inspiration to unleash his 'Literary Revolution'. Hu found further support for his ideas in the Chinese trivial literature tradition, pointing out that many of the great novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties had in fact been written in the contemporary vernacular. What he did not acknowledge was the fact that the vernacular that he himself advocated was very different from that found in the great novels. The modern Chinese vernacular was an intellectualized writing language, enriched with literally hundreds of new vocabulary items: translations into Chinese characters of Western terms and concepts, which had been invented in Japan and were simply taken over by the Chinese. This process of importation of new vocabulary had been taking place for a number of decades preceding Hu Shi's proposals, as Japanese examples, and even direct Japanese involvement dominated the flourishing Chinese printing industry. Although lingering nationalist sensitivities continue to hamper serious research in this area, it is fair to say that, at least in the modern period, both the physical and intellectual presence of 'Japan' in China has had a very significant cultural impact.

A similar observation, albeit one that is more commonplace, can be made about the Western presence in modern China. Historical conditions, i.e. the processes of imperialism, assured that this presence was not just intellectual but also physical, and that its effects were not just those of influence but also those of real pressure. The reason why the activities of cultural innovators like Hu Shi, and the much-acclaimed fiction writer Lu Xun, continue to stand out today is not so much because we still believe that they represent the official starting point of modernity, but because of the radicalism of their proposed reforms. Their almost wholesale rejection of

classical language and traditional literary forms and genres in favour of short stories, free verse and drama written in the vernacular betray an anxiety that comes with a concrete fear of China's extinction as a nation-state. As Chinese history followed its tortuous path in the course of the twentieth century, this bold spirit of 'cultural revolution' has often been hailed by the political power in charge of the new canon. It is as yet unclear to what extent these early radicals and their writings could lay claim to the same cultural status that the communist regime later bestowed on them. It seems more likely that their radical stance, and their anxiety, was at least partly conditioned by the fact that they were *not* as influential as they wanted to be. At least until 1949, the year of the communist official assumption of power, there were many other types of writing, some of them much more continuous with tradition, that were read and valued by Chinese readers. At the same time, some might argue that the strictly utilitarian and highly moralist literary system established by the communists represents the most traditional of all modern Chinese cultural discourses.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVENTIONS

In our own day and age, both Chinese and Japanese literature are part of a global literary system which, though still largely dominated by Europe and North America, allows for relatively more opportunities for exchange, mutual inspiration and articulation of cultural difference. The worldwide circulation of theory is part of this system and allows scholars from various countries and various backgrounds to make the kind of critical interventions presented in this book. There are thirteen chapters in all in this book, loosely grouped together partly on the basis of the theories that inspired them and partly in chronological order.

In the first chapter, Rey Chow deals with a number of the anxieties of modern Chinese literature touched upon at the end of the previous section. Through a joint reading of a 'politically incorrect' wartime story by Lao She and texts by Walter Benjamin, Chow analyses the literary character of the collector and the uncomfortable relationship between individual attachment to objects, and eventually to art, and commitment to a collective goal, or to the fate of a nation-state. Chow's seamless integration of theoretical discourses into the analysis of a Chinese story successfully problematizes the conventional view of Lao She as an unconditionally patriotic writer at the centre of the modern Chinese canon.

Haruo Shirane's contribution takes a broad look at Japanese literary history, also with regard to questions of canon formation. Shifts in critical outlook, in Japan as well as in the West, have led to continuously changing

notions of what essentially makes up 'Japanese literature'. Traditionally, literary history has usually been a narrative of the decline and fall of genres; the re-evaluation or disavowal of certain genres and the decline in status of texts in Chinese has resulted in not one but several canons that are all markedly different from pre-modern and early modern ideas of what were important texts. The agendas behind these re-evaluations were manifold, but as a rule revolved around establishing and reinforcing the identity of the canonizers, and could be inspired by upcoming nationalism as well as Western ideas of *belles-lettres*. It was especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that this reappraisal took its most far-reaching form and Shirane makes clear how some of the now well-established texts in fact only gained their recognition less than a century ago.

In Chapter 3, Haun Saussy performs a true critical *tour de force* in his highly engaged and highly relevant discussion of the method of deconstruction. Subjecting Derrida's writing about the Chinese language to the kind of rigorous dissection that Derrida himself applies to others, Saussy concludes that Derrida's China is a caricature meant to serve as the perfect alternative to the European intellectual order he seeks to undermine. Following the same line of inquiry, Saussy discovers similar principles at work in writings about China and Japan by Kristeva, Barthes, Brecht and others. Rather than chastising these thinkers for their shortcomings, however, Saussy finds renewed inspiration in the conclusion that the relationship between 'theory' and 'area' is never one of simple application, and that 'the work of deconstruction' is far from finished.

Similar to Saussy, Hilary Chung, in her chapter, starts out by taking a famous French post-structuralist thinker (Kristeva) to task for 'misunderstanding' China, more specifically Chinese women. Chung, too, realizes that these misunderstandings originate in Kristeva's wish to appropriate Chinese women for her own theoretical and political project. At the same time, however, Kristeva's theorization of women's 'dissident positionality' allows Chung to reread works by four well-known early modern Chinese women writers (Chen Hengzhe, Lu Yin, Ding Ling and Feng Yuanjun) and to place them in an 'anti-essentialist' context, i.e. in a context that has been obscured by later canonization processes. The question at the end of Chung's chapter, however, states clearly the problems that remain: 'although [Kristevan analysis] opens up avenues for a fruitful anti-essentialist analysis . . . how can such a project be viable when it is rooted in a seriously flawed construction of China?'

Moving to questions of aesthetic value, Rein Raud, in Chapter 5, challenges the existing dichotomy between text-centred approaches of literature and sociocentric theories that see texts as objects of social intercourse. His interest lies in combining the two approaches by focusing

on the literary quality of texts. In order to do so, Raud formulates a set of values that a text may assume. The first step is to understand the cultural grammar to which the literary texts are specific. The second step is to see whether they may also function within a larger grammar of different cultures. Texts with intrinsic literary values, Raud argues, do indeed function within the larger grammar, or even challenge it (as opposed to being merely boring or not understood). Raud deftly illustrates his ideas by applying them to a reading of a classic Japanese text, *Sarashina Diary* (*Sarashina nikki*).

Chapter 6, by Bernhard Fuehrer, is a highly rigorous philological exercise in reading and interpretation of *one line* from one of the most canonical works of classical Chinese literature: Confucius' *Analecets* (*Lunyu*). Collecting and analysing a large number of commentaries on, and translations of, the line produced by Chinese exegetes and foreign translators throughout the centuries, Fuehrer identifies a number of clearly distinct traditions of interpretation, some of which assign almost opposite meanings to the line in question. Though not grounded in contemporary theory, Fuehrer's essay, in some sense, is more fundamentally post-structuralist than the work of many self-proclaimed post-structuralists, as he shows that, both in the Chinese exegetical tradition and in the Western sinological tradition, meaning is very much context bound. Fuehrer shows that the very foundations of Chinese philosophy, literature and culture are texts that are so old and so ambiguous that they can literally be made to mean anything.

In a second contribution inspired by philology, Michel Vieillard-Baron discusses the extent to which ancient texts can be knowable. Philology teaches that the reconstruction of the text comes first: what can we know or conclude about its transmission and origin and its faithfulness to the first copy? Then we may ask ourselves if we can reconstruct the text's meaning. In this particular instance an extra layer is added, since the question is whether the text at hand is a forgery. The answer provides new insights into our understanding of the language and function of poetic treatises in medieval Japan.

Daria Berg's chapter on a seventeenth-century Chinese novel is grounded in the methods of new historicism. Rather than continuing existing arguments about the qualities of the texts within the specific genre of writing to which it is supposed to belong, Berg opens up the text to a wide range of historical sources (or 'voices') from the same period. Berg shows that the novel is much more than just a comic story about a Chinese virago, but an important comment on a pressing social issue of its time, namely the relationship between the traditional gentry and the rising merchant class, as they were beginning to interact and indeed intermarry. Berg's chapter