

Literature, Aesthetics and History:

Forum of Cultural Exchange between
China and the Netherlands

文学·美学·历史

中荷文化交流论坛文集

● Chief Editors

Lu Jiande & Ernst van Alphen

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陆建德 【荷兰】恩斯特·凡·阿尔芬

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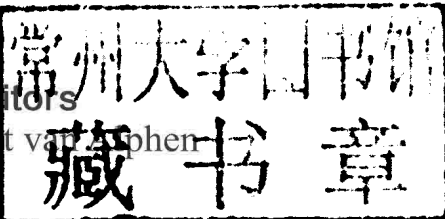
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Welcome Remarks

Dutch maritime activities during the Golden Age ushered in the global dawn, with all its promises and challenges. Although trade between China and the Netherlands in the 17th century had a cultural impact (Delftware is a case in point), the merchants in Canton were totally ignorant of Dutch culture and the achievement of contemporary Dutch painting, and *vice versa*. Here lies the significance of the theme for this Forum: Literature, Aesthetics and History. If the dream and bubble of *homo economicus* has burst, our interests in our neighbors, close or distant, and our desire to communicate with them, have become stronger. For better communication and understanding we turn to the area of arts. Present-day Chinese and Dutch writers have produced an extraordinary array of portrayals of human variety, which is stubbornly resistant to any general, familiar and politically correct terms. Indeed, self-knowledge is the highest form of wisdom. This knowledge, however, comes from an in-depth knowledge of other people and other nations, from a selfless pursuit of what is true. The ethic of this disinterested quest is aptly summed up in a line that once moved Lu Xun: “Waar de mensheid is, en haar weedom, daar is mijn weg.” (“Where mankind is, and her woe, there is my path.”)

On behalf of Institute of Literature I extend to all the participants here my hearty welcome. I hope the forum will mark the very beginning of a great dialogue.

LU Jiande

Director of Institute of Literature,
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

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Exoticism or the Translation of Cultural Difference

Ernst van Alphen

The “critical dimension of literature and art” is still the most common criteria of aesthetic judgment in Western contemporary aesthetic thought. With the rise of modernist aesthetics, in one way or another, a literary text or art work is supposed to embody a critical point of view. This critical dimension should, however, not be articulated explicitly, because then it becomes propaganda. It should be demonstrated in an indirect way; shown, acted out, but not said. The implied criticism is not necessarily political, social, or existential. It can also be self-referential by the embodiment of a critique on the literary or artistic tradition. But it is the critical position of a work which serves as a touchstone for critics to differentiate between good and bad works, important and insignificant works.

Although this critical dimension is still highly common as criteria of judgement, at the same time it has become impossible or contested as criteria of judgement in an era that is defined by cultural postcolonialism. According to French art critic Bourriaud, the comparatist ideology underlying postcolonialism, especially when it manifests itself as multiculturalism, is paving the way for a complete atomization of references and criteria of aesthetic judgment.^① For, present critical discourse on art and literature is based on the desire for recognition of cultural difference and of the other as other. This complicates critical judgment radically. In the words of Bourriaud:

① Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, New York: Lukas & Steinberg, 2009.

If I am a Western white man, for instance, how can I exercise critical judgment on the work of a black Cameroonian woman without the risk of inadvertently imposing on it an outlook corrupted by Eurocentrism? How can a heterosexual critique the work of a gay artist without relaying a dominant perspective? (25)

This impasse results in what he calls an aesthetic *courtesy*: an attitude that consists of refusing to pass critical judgement for fear of ruffling the sensitivity of the other. This courtesy has as perverse effect that European and American scholars and critics view non-western writers and artists as guests to be treated with respect and politeness, but not as “full-fledged actors on the cultural scene in their own right”. For the discourse of cultural difference and multiculturalism seems to exclude the possibility that a Chinese writer or artist can be compared to (related to) a Dutch one within a shared theoretical or conceptual space. This is not only so because of the conviction that cultural products should be understood in terms of their cultural specificity, (which makes them incomparable) but also because the repercussions of modern aesthetics are for Western writers and artists not the same as for non-Western writers and artists. Whereas Chinese, Nigerian or Mexican writers are supposed to produce their cultural difference and specificity in their works; Dutch, French or American writers and artists are still judged on the basis of the critical dimension of their work. Different criteria for aesthetic judgment are applied depending on the cultural identity of writer or artist.

As a critique of modernist universalism multiculturalism is in a way a return to pre-modernist classical Western thought. Classical Western thought as well as multiculturalism operate on a logic of membership. A literary text or work of art is thus inevitably explained by the condition or origin of its author. Everyone is located, registered in and locked into the tradition in which s/he was born. The work of a second-generation Chinese immigrant writer, or of a black, gay Afro-American artist will be read through the prism of the bio-political framework that

multiculturalism is. The problem of this framework is, of course, is that it assumes that people are definitely assigned to their cultural, ethnic, geographic or sexual identity. And second, that works of art and literary texts, can be explained and judged by these identities.

The multiculturalists' position seems to imply, however, a new criterion for aesthetic judgment. If each writer and artist should be judged in accord with her/his own culture, it implies that contemporary literature and art should be considered as a conservatory of traditions and identities. (This function to conserve is, in fact, the almost complete opposite of attributing a critical dimension to art and literature.) But the degree of successfulness as conservatory of traditions and identities becomes then the new criteria for critical judgment.

One can of course argue that art's function of being a conservatory, instead of being critical, is critical within the contemporary social economic situation. It is critical of the social production of globalization in which traditions and identities are eradicated in the name of economic efficiency. But this critical dimension of the conservatory position is extremely limited because highly exclusive. The conserved traditions and identities can only be understood and appreciated for what they are by viewers or readers who partake in the same traditions and identities. For, the idea that art works and literary texts should be judged according to the codes of its author's local culture implies the existence of viewers and readers who master each culture's referential field. When the reader/viewer does not master the referential field of the artist's culture, s/he cannot really pass a critical or aesthetic judgement about the work, s/he can only get information from the work. Depending on how plausible one thinks the existence of such a viewer or reader mastering each culture's referential field is, one can come to two different conclusions:

- 1) we should postulate an ideal viewer/reader with the properties of a universal decoder of all cultural traditions and identities (Bouriaud 29);
- 2) we should accept the idea that aesthetic judgment should be

suspended indefinitely.

I know, to put the dilemma as radical and binary as this simplifies the situation. But this binary exposes well the ultimate implications (different as they are) of the cultural determinisms of the multiculturalists' paradigm.

As a way out of this aporia Bourriaud formulates the new challenge of aesthetic judgment as follows:

How can we simultaneously defend the existence of cultural singularities yet oppose the idea of judging works by those singularities, that is to say, refuse to judge them only in keeping with their traditions?
(40)

Bourriaud finds an answer to this question in the notion of translation. We should not just conform to or follow the codes and references of other cultures, but we should harmonize their codes with other codes, by making resonate with a history and with problems born of other cultures. Such a practice is an act of translation because translation implies a mastery of both languages and in the act of translation one denies neither the unspeakable nor possible opacities of meaning, since every translation is inevitable incomplete and leaves behind an irreducible remainder. (30).

Difficult as it is to understand what translation as criteria for aesthetic judgment can mean, Bourriaud provides some examples of cultural practices and artists who succeed well in this (artistic) practice of cultural translation. Thai/Argentinean artist Rikrit Tiravanija, also Bourriaud's prime example in his earlier work about relational aesthetics, has forged connections between conceptual art and the Buddhist tradition. His work would be an exemplary model of formal and historical transcoding. Japanese artist Tsuyoshi Ozawa's has renewed objects from traditional Japanese culture by introducing practices originating in the European Fluxus movement. These two artists do not just accumulate heterogeneous elements in their work, but they aim to make meaningful

connections in "the infinite text of world culture". (39)

Another of his examples is the cultural practice of creolization. Creoleness is the *interactional or transactional aggregate* of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history"^① Creolization produces languages, discourses and objects that are the province of both the familiar and the foreign and that express journey rather than territory. The ingredients that compose these languages and objects do not represent instances of otherness in relation to a dominant culture, but simply elsewhere or other ways. (74) Hierarchical relations between centre and margins are not at stake.

Bouriaud also mentions French writer Victor Segalen as a role model for an aesthetic practice based on making meaningful relations between cultures. In the first two decades of the 20th century Segalen developed a concept that can be seen as a more elaborate and complex version of Bouriaud's idea of aesthetic translation. Segalen's term for this mode of translation is *exoticism*. This is, of course, rather surprising because nowadays exotism has a bad name. And not only nowadays, already in Segalen's days at least for Segalen himself. That is why his writings about exotism should be seen as an effort to reconceptualise the notorious cultural attitude of exoticism.^② Dwelling in the Chinese city Tientsin, on 18 October 1911 he wrote the following about his *Essay on Exoticism*:

I will not conceal it: this book will disappoint most readers. Despite its exotic title, it cannot be about such things as the tropics or coconut trees, the colonies or Negro souls, nor about camels, ships, great waves, scents, spices, or enchanted islands. It cannot be about misunderstandings and native uprisings, nothingness and death, colored tears, oriental thought, and various oddities, nor about any of the preposterous things that

^① Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant, "In Praise of Creoleness," *Callaloo* 13, no. 4 (1990): pp. 891-92.

^② Victor Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetic of Diversity*. Translated and edited by Yaël Schlick. Foreword by Harry Harootunian. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

the world “Exoticism” calls to mind. Even less so can it be about those writers who gave Exoticism this meaning. For it is in this way that “exoticism” became compromised and bloated. (46)

On 6 May 1913, still in Tientsin, he added to this:

I will not deplore “incomprehensibilities,” but on the contrary, praise them to the utmost. Most importantly, the book will not be about budgets and administrations; though the worst curse that could fall upon this book would be for it to be forever dismembered, confused with, perhaps even celebrated in good faith under the rubric “colonial,” and classified as colonial literature. (56)

Born in 1878 in Brest, Segalen studied medicine and wrote his thesis about neurotics in contemporary literature. He became interested in the work of painter Paul Gauguin, embarked for Polynesia and arrived in the Marquesas Islands in 1903, just too late to meet Gauguin who had just died. Segalen wrote then a text about his visit to Gauguin’s studio in Hiva Oa. In which he also becomes a defender of the “natives” and is critical about the colonial administration. Discovering the Maori civilization at a moment when their extinction was already under way thanks to their colonialization, he wrote extensively about this culture.

After his contact with the Maoris he started to travel incessantly. In 1907 he published a book, titled *The Lapse of Memory*, which portrays the culture of a people, the Maoris, debilitated by colonialization. Upon returning in Paris, he studied Chinese. He participated in an archaeological mission to the “middle kingdom” and after that he stayed frequently for long periods of time in China. In 1912 he published in French a book, titled *Stèles*, which is intensely inspired by his contact with Chinese culture.^① His capacity for empathy with this culture

① Victor Segalen, *Stèles*. Translated and Annotated by Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush; with a foreword by Haun Saussy. Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2007.

is so great that, what I have been told, among Chinese readers this book passes today as a book belonging to their own literary corpus. Although written in French it is completely on a Chinese wavelength. How did he do this, and is this really possible? Did he really cancel out the filter or perspective of his French, European frame of thought and was he really able to demonstrate, embody Chinese traditions in an unmediated way? I will dwell on his *Essay on Exoticism* to see how he reflected on the possibility and desirability of establishing meaningful connections between cultures, in this case French and Chinese culture.

In the *Essay on Exoticism* Segalen tried to theorize the experience of diversity and the relation to the other. He envisaged this book as his greatest, most important book. But like Walter Benjamin did in his *Passagenwerk*, he wrote only fragments of this book. He calls these fragments "essays towards An Essay on Exoticism". These fragments were published after his death, a selection of it, made by Pierre Jean Jouve, in 1955, and a complete edition more than twenty years later in 1978.

Segalen considers exoticism to be a "manifestation of diversity" (66) at other moments also "an aesthetics of diversity" (67). He defines "diverse" "everything that until now was called foreign, strange, unexpected, surprising, mysterious, amorous, superhuman, heroic, and even divine, everything that is *Other*" (67). At first sight, such a definition does not seem to be that different from the conventional attitude of exotism. But diversity concerns more than everything that is *Other*: it merges with beauty, everything that is other or different is beautiful:

This is because diversity for some is a specific kind of nourishment for beauty, but, at the same time and to a certain degree diversity merges and subsides within something which is no longer different or homogenous but: Beautiful. (40)

This merging of diversity with the beautiful explains why exotism is a kind of

aesthetics. But the aesthetics of diversity is more specific than the aesthetic principle as such. He argues, for instance, that Ming art is more generally beautiful than K'ang-hi art because it uses less porcelain and is less Chinese. This implies that K'ang-hi art exemplifies convincingly an aesthetics of diversity, whereas Ming art does not, or less so.

Beauty has generalizing elements which appear to obliterate the Beauty of Diversity—which would then be merely material for beauty, not the realization of beauty. (40)

Beauty of Diversity is not just a specific case of beauty; it is in tension with it, because beauty obliterates diversity. When diversity merges with the beautiful it is no longer “different”. This explains why Segalen’s aesthetics of exoticism can ultimately not be understood in terms of beauty and the beautiful. The terms he uses to describe this aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime, not of beauty. I will come back to this.

This problematic process of the merging of diversity is also central in Segalen’s dismissive description of contemporaneous authors who excel in exoticism: French author Pierre Loti and Irish/Greek author Patrick Lafcadio Hearn. He calls them pseudo-exots, the “Panderers of the Sensation of Diversity” (29). “The Lotis are mystically drunk with and unconscious of their object. They confuse it with themselves and passionately intermingle with it, ‘drunk with their god!’” (34). Lafcadio Hearn even adopted a Japanese name, and is also known as Koizumi Yakumo.

Loti and Hearn were a kind of cultural cross-dressers and their writing expresses an excessive yearning for identification with the other. Loti is known for his impersonations of “natives”, especially Chinese, and he prefigures in that respect Lawrence who dressed in drag in order to perform as an authentic Arab. Hearn tried desperately to become Japanese and imagined himself to live a Japanese life. He became especially known by his collections of Japanese legends and ghost stories, such as *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, the kind of narratives that

fascinate the traditional eroticist mindset intensely.

Such a merging with the desired, idealized other destroys the personality of the merging subject. The real experience of exoticism does the exact opposite. It does not lead to merging but to the capacity to discriminate:

The capacity to discriminate is formed through the experience of diversity. Those who are capable of tasting it are strengthened, enhanced, and intensified by the experience. It crushes the others. If it destroys their personality as well, it is because their personality was very weak or made of something other than the true capacity to experience exoticism. (40)

Segalen distinguishes himself from Loti and Hearn by refusing to identify with what is interesting to him. He clarifies, for instance, that his study of Chinese is not motivated by his interest in exoticism, "as the study of Chinese surely represents a world of thought that is as poles apart from my own as I could wish." (29) And in a reflection about diversity in terms of the human, the superhuman and the inhuman, he declares: "Let us not imitate the Chinese ('of the limpid and fine heart'") who gave to one of their richest types, in Kiang-Ye, 'that most male of types, more manly than all men—the posthumous nickname of the Inhuman.' " (60).

In order to experience exoticism and diversity one needs a strong individuality. Weak personalities will be crushed in that experience. The experience is namely a kind of rapture which is forceful, violent and manifests itself as shock. It is in this rapture of the subject conceiving its (exotic) object, that the subject recognizes its own difference from itself. In order to describe this moment of differentiation from the "other", Segalen uses the kind of discourse which is also typical for modernity and the shocks caused by modern, metropolitan life. When he argues that only a strong individuality can fully appreciate the wonderful sensation of feeling both what one is and what one is not, he concludes the following:

Exoticism is therefore not that kaleidoscopic vision of the tourist or of the mediocre spectator, but the forceful and curious reaction to a shock felt by someone of strong individuality in response to some object whose distance from oneself he alone can perceive and savor. (21)

The sensation of exoticism is in that sense complementary to the one of individualism: Experience of the one implies automatically the experience of the other. This sensation of exoticism is the experience or confrontation with an inability, the inability to comprehend:

Exoticism is therefore not an adaptation to something; it is not the perfect comprehension of something outside one's self that one has managed to embrace fully, but the keen and immediate perception of an eternal incomprehensibility. Let us proceed from this admission of impenetrability. Let us not flatter ourselves for assimilating the customs, races, nations, and others who differ from us. On the contrary, let us rejoice in our inability ever to do so, for we thus retain the eternal pleasure of sensing Diversity. (21)

But being marked by this "sensing of Diversity" and the recognition of difference, the "knowledge that something is other than one's self", exoticism is the act of a conscious being who, in conceiving himself, can only do so as "other than he is". So, exoticism is ultimately an aesthetic practice of self-discovery. It results in revelatory moments in which the individual self is being disclosed or discovered. In the recognition of his difference from others, "he rejoices in his Diversity", and he sees for the first time himself as other than what he thought he was. The other that he finds in the sensation of exoticism is in himself and is himself. ^① So, one can conclude now that exoticism is a method

^① Harry Harootunian, "Foreword: The Exotics of Nowhere", in: Victor Segalen, *Stèles*. Ibid., p. xiii.