FOREWORD

With the privilege of introducing this, the third and final volume of Wu Kuang-ming’s *A Cultural Hermeneutic*, I recall that in the Foreword to the first volume I waxed about his extraordinary erudition in both Chinese and Western intellectual cultures. In the Foreword to the second volume I likened him to one of the besotted Seven Sages of the Bamboo grove for his boundless imagination. I’m hard pressed to find a metaphor for his work in the present volume.

Wu the hermeneut is like Hermes, messenger of the gods, of course. This volume is a comprehensive study of metaphor, treating every theory or characterization of metaphor that has had any public in the West, from Plato and Aristotle to Max Black, Derrida, and Lakoff and Johnson, and in China, from Confucius and Zhuangzi to Hu Shih and Wu himself. One result of reading this long study is a thorough education in the literature of metaphor. But Hermes is not the right metaphor because he was supposed only to carry the messages of others, the gods.

Wu, by contrast, gives such “added value” in carrying the messages that he is more like the culture-making gods, say Athena, Apollo, or maybe Prometheus. First, this book creates a composite and comprehensive approach to metaphor. It’s not a theory, of course, but a new extended metaphor about metaphor. Second, what metaphor does is to extend understanding in new directions, creating new bridges between cultures and expanding each culture. This is a perfect illustration of Charles Peirce’s theory of agapistic evolutionary love, although Wu does not exploit the Peircean metaphors. Third, Wu creates a way of living between cultures, inhabiting several and yet living back and forth with them. His is not a higher-level culture, except in the trivial sense that it objectifies cultures, but a way of life between cultures. Perhaps in the course of time, a global super-culture will develop, but that is not Wu’s hope. His project is to create a way that enjoys and plays among all the cultures. Godlike.

Yet Wu is not like a creative god, bursting with the arbitrariness of the creative act. On the contrary, this book is a system in the ancient sense of looking at its topics from every angle imaginable. Sometimes “system” means a set of basic categories or even “root
metaphors,” and this volume is not systematic in this sense. But this is a system in the sense of being as comprehensive as possible, looking at things from as many theoretical and cultural perspectives as possible. As our common teacher, Paul Weiss, said, system in this sense is the only protection against dogmatism. Wu might not like to be characterized as a systematician because he often complains about the attempt to be literal that he associates with system-building. But he is the closest thinker we have to Hegel today, giving metaphor much the same meaning as Geist and deliberately stretching philosophic categories over the boundaries of the cultures from which they arose, and going on and on.

Why is it important to find a metaphor for Wu the author rather than to introduce the book with a mention of its themes and their importance (actually, I’ve done that too)? This volume, indeed the trilogy A Cultural Hermeneutic, is a singular contribution to culture. As an interpreter of the many theories of metaphor, Wu is masterfully erudite, but is brilliantly idiosyncratic in what he picks up as important. Perhaps no one else would read the texts his way—not that he misrepresents them: he asks them questions no one else has the angle or culture to ask, especially in thinking between China and the West. As a creator of new cultural understanding, Wu invents ways of thought and life that others simply had not thought to consider. Following his argument is like taking a journey where you build not only the road as you go but the very terrain itself, as Satan’s fall from heaven in Paradise Lost creates spatial extension, “distance” from heaven (perfection) to elsewhere. As a systematician, Wu has a new list of angles from which to view metaphor, giving rise to a new map. Partly this comes from his conjunction and interweaving of Western and Chinese sources. But even within those traditions he finds gold where others found only pyrite.

So I must stress the singularity, the uniqueness, the idiosyncratic genius of Wu Kuang-ming and his project. To meet such a figure is a rare privilege, and we are honored to have this book. The metaphoric figure to whom Wu personally would most like to be likened is Zhuangzi, on whom he has written several books. But that metaphor does not work because Zhuangzi gets his own identity out of the way, and even gets his topics out of the way. Wu is far too singular and systematic for that: these books are encounters with the man himself encountering his topics. So I beg leave to suggest that the metaphoric figure in whose train Wu follows (to use Plato’s
metaphor for the soul finding its god, in the *Phaedrus*, is Confucius. Claiming to originate nothing new but only to pass on what he had himself received, Confucius invented an approach to culture that gave rise to a way of life that has grown like a metaphor for two and a half millennia. Wu’s ambition is Confucian in this sense, and we shall see whether history follows through with his intercultural program.

I commend this book as a way forward in this time of clashing and entangled cultures.

Robert Cummings Neville
Boston University, July 30, 2001
Repetitions herein thread repeated readings.
Insanity alone reads these pages at a sitting.

KBC