Preface

The papers presented in this volume are the product of a forum, "The Image of Westerners in East Asian literature," which was held in August 1997 during the 15th Triennial Congress of the International Comparative Literature in Leiden, Holland. At my suggestion, the forum was co-chaired by myself and a Japanese scholar, Professor Sukehiro Hirakawa.

Many people have been curious to know why I chose to examine this topic. To explain myself, I must explain some of my misgivings about current developments in comparative literature. Since the late 1980s, comparative literature has been dominated by theoretical concerns. This trend to theorization can be attributed to certain real needs: theorization has to some degree provided new research perspectives and encouraged the maturing of the discipline. But it appears that this new theoretical trend will not succeed in entirely supplanting certain traditions of the discipline. There are indeed shortcomings in the traditional approach to the study of international literary relations; and scholars have already offered a number of explanations for these. Nevertheless, any discipline must retain a degree of continuity. Comparative literature was nurtured in these traditions. There were reasons why this discipline was conceived and developed. I believe that contemporary scholars of comparative literature...
have the right to renovate traditions, but they should never adopt a nihilist posture of total negation.

In 1993 I read Daniel-Henry Pageaux’s essay on contemporary imagology—the analysis of images in literary and other texts—in Précis de littérature comparée—sous la direction de Pierre Brunel et Yves Chevrel (PUF, 1989). I was immediately struck by Pageaux’s unique perspective. The study of images of the “foreign” in national literary traditions belongs to the traditional purview of comparative literature. Pageaux did more than uphold this tradition; he reinvented it using new theoretical concerns and perspectives (in particular, semiotics and reception aesthetics). On this basis, he was able to offer a theory and methodology that was both usable and in tune with contemporary concerns. In sum, Pageaux was able to raise the imagology to a new and systematic level. This renovation of a traditional approach was precisely what I felt we needed. From there, I began translating the relevant papers by Pageaux and other European scholars, including his former student Professor Jean-Marc Moura. As well, I developed a course in Peking University’s Institute of Comparative Literature and Culture on “The Theory and Practice of Imagology.”

During a class discussion on the image of Westerners in late Qing and early Republican Chinese literature, I felt that images of the foreign were indeed a striking example of how images are refracted through their creators. That is, these images are a symbolic discourse through which the self is literalized. As the great French Sinologist, Jacque Gernet puts it: “Every society’s view of the other is racial-centric...In fact each society imagines the other based on its own social, political, religious and ethical traditions, based on its own spiritual paradigms and perspectives on humanity and the world. Therefore, the description of foreigners is no small matter. It touches on the things that are most intrinsic and most fundamental to any society or culture. However, we can also say that this perspective is also multi-faceted, because it changes with the mores and issues of concern of every age. Therefore, a society’s view of foreigners may at times be one of disinterest, or curiosity, or rapturous approval, or unjust condescension or hatred. But the reasons for this infatuation or repulsion are in themselves always enlightening.”

What is notable is that most of the early descriptions of Westerners by Chinese people come from sketches, travel notes and other sub-literary works, and not from fictional works. In these works the imaginative and

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the descriptive intermingle. In them, the image of the foreign is not merely a reproduction of reality; rather, the image has been re-organized and written according to the cultural models and processes of the viewer. But it was precisely because Chinese people were striving to present the “reality” they perceived that the images developed into ones of alterity which gradually transformed their understanding of the outside world. Just as interactions between themselves and the “other” gradually transformed their understanding of themselves. Of course, this was a long-drawn out process of many centuries. But it is precisely for this reason that the role of the “literary self” cannot be neglected. Indeed, the literary self and the literary other are produced through a mechanism of mutual interaction. When discourse about the other reaches a certain point it produces a reaction whereby traditional cultural models and processes are themselves altered. Is this not the ethical foundation for Paul Ricoeur’s “living tradition”?

One other find of this classroom forum was that we discovered that the image of Westerners in Chinese literature has been virtually untouched as an academic subject. It was this experience that led me to propose a forum on the topic at the Leiden conference. Based on the principle mutual interactions between the “discursive self” and the “discursive other” I set down the following outlines:

Literature as a social production. Since the 16th century east Asian societies have all experienced painful histories of colonialism and imperialism, and this led to long anti-imperialist struggles in each of these societies. At the same time, sooner or later each of these societies recognized the necessity of opening itself up and learning from the West. Hence, Western culture exerted a considerable influence on the modern history of every East Asian country. The study of images of foreigners in East Asian literatures can proceed from the perspectives of sociology, anthropology, history, cultural studies or literary studies. Imagology can reveal the many complex social and cultural issues these countries have confronted during their modern histories: the struggle but imperialism and anti-imperialism, the clash and mixing of national traditions and external cultures, the different values of Eastern and Western societies, the benefits and costs of modernization.

Placing literary production in its social-cultural context and applying inter-disciplinary research methods is one of the directions in which comparative literary studies is developing. In this sense, the Leiden forum also addressed methodological issues of great significance. The topics that
the forum focused on were:

1. Since the 16th century until the present, how have Westerners been described in different national literatures in different historical periods?
2. What produced these images? And why did they change in the course of history? What historical and cultural contexts lay behind their emergence, and what kind of collective imagination did their reveal?
3. Are images of Westerners in East Asian literatures artefacts of history? To what extent do they reflect relations between present social and cultural developments and the past?
4. What are literary strategies that have been used in these literatures to depict Westerners? Are there any shared patterns?

The forum was attended by scholars from China, Japan and Korea as well as by some European and Canadian scholars. Unfortunately, a number of the participants were unable to turn their presentations into finished papers, and it is a matter for regret that there are no contributions from Korean scholars in this collection. As the title indicates, this collection contains contributions from Japan and China (including Hong Kong), and these have been divided into two sections for the convenience of readers. The papers cover a vast range of history and territory. As well, the approaches that contributors have taken to their subjects range from historical investigations of linguistic practices, to literary analysis. Some papers examine individual authors such as Lu Xun and Zhu Ziqing; others examine historical periods or literary movements.

Readers will discern considerable differences between how the Chinese and Japanese contributors have addressed their topics. The former have concentrated on the historical and cultural contexts of the production of images; the latter have tended to concentrate on internal analysis of texts. This may reflect the different currents and concerns of comparative literary studies in China and Japan. As well, comparative literary studies began in China relatively late; and for most of the Chinese contributors this represents their first attempt at an analysis of the production of images.

Initially, I and Professor Sukehiro Hirakawa were complete strangers. We commenced correspondence in organizing this forum. As a senior scholar of comparative literature and as an individual, Professor Sukehiro Hirakawa has deeply impressed me. His paper, which summarizes many of the questions raised about the imagology and other issues
during the forum, appears at the end of this volume. I am also grateful to Dr. Xiaoyi Zhou for his cooperation, which helped me to overcome many of the trials encountered during editing this book. I am also grateful to Christopher Buckley for translating all of the papers that were originally in Chinese, and polishing the ones written in English. Finally I wish to thank the convenor of the Leiden conference, Professor Theo D’haen, for his constant academic and organizational support for the forum and for this volume.

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Translated by Christopher Buckley