Out of the Cultural Ghetto. Theory, Politics, and the Study of Chinese Literature*

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The last few years have witnessed the appearance of a number of controversial essays and critical responses which, when brought together and examined in a concentrated manner, may well signal a crucial moment of fundamental change in the field of Chinese literature studies in America. Judging from the polemical intensity of these essays, it seems indisputable that the change has made its impact felt in the relatively narrow circle of specialists, and that it is precisely the self-enclosure of this very circle, with which many scholars in this field have become discontented, which is being broken and changed. The advent of this transformative moment is of course not without the anxiety and agony that typically mark the contingencies and ambivalence of a turning-point, but the controversies and debates deserve our careful examination not only because they manifest a sense of disorientation as well as paradigmatic change, but also because the contested issues force us to rethink the underlying assumptions of literary analysis and criticism. A sober understanding of these issues thus promises to carry implications that will go beyond the study of Chinese literature as a specific field. To the extent that it does not participate in a dialogue with studies of other literatures and does not address critical issues of interest to a wide range of audiences beyond the boundary of local specialties, the study of Chinese literature, despite the long history of that literature and its rich content, is likely to remain a narrow and marginal field as compared with the study of English or French, something of a cultural ghetto, one might even say, closed and of little interest to outsiders in the academic environment of the American university.

The challenge of theory

In order to understand the recent debates in the study of Chinese literature, I shall first mention the pressure for change coming from two different directions, to which the recent signals of change may be seen as a response from within the field of Chinese literature studies. It is undeniable that literary studies in America since the 1960s have been heavily influenced by a plethora of critical theories grounded in European continental philosophy, especially its French variety. There has been a pervasive infusion of critical theory into all the areas of literary studies, a situation Gerald Graff has characterized as a “theory explosion” (Graff, 1981).
1987:3). As western literary theories — structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, reader-response criticism, new historicism, feminism, Marxism, and a number of others — have mainly been concerned with reading texts of the western canon in different ways so as to question, challenge, or subvert a humanistic tradition of western culture, it is not surprising that the study of English and other European literatures has been the first to bear the impact of this ‘theory explosion’. The recent debates I shall soon examine, however, seem to suggest that the study of Chinese literature is now also confronted with the challenge of theory that other literatures have already faced.

Some more than symbolic gestures of this challenge have appeared when theorists in the West begin to reflect on non-western or Third World culture in relation to that of the western world. Although their reflections on the non-western often serve to set off what they understand as the western tradition, their comments on the language, literature, and culture of China present a real challenge that often has a notable impact on modern Chinese writers and critics. I shall cite as an example the works of Fredric Jameson, America’s foremost Marxist critic and one of the most influential theorists, who has written not only extensively on western theory and culture, on postmodernism and late Marxism, but has also made some intriguing and provocative remarks specifically on modern Chinese literature. Jameson first interposed himself in Chinese literature studies in the form of a commentary in 1984 when he joined William Tay, Edward Gunn, and Sung-sheng Chang in the discussion of a number of important texts. As we can expect of Jameson, his critical commentary is at the same time a highly theoretical analysis based on Marxist ideas he has himself developed concerning the modes of production and the expansion of capital and market economy in postmodernity. In his analysis of Lao She’s *Camel Xiangzi* as a complex narrative in which there is “a superposition of two distinct narrative paradigms”, Jameson clearly tries to read this Chinese novel as in some way disclosing the problems of an incipient capitalism in a non-western context, in which the coexistence and interaction of different modes of production, and the mixture of precapitalist and capitalist mentalities, become, in the fictional world of the novel, the tension between two narrative paradigms or two forms (Jameson, 1984:67). Jameson argues that Xiangzi’s passion, his precapitalist fixation on the desired object itself (the rickshaw), and the old narrative paradigm of the wheel of Fortune (Xiangzi’s necessary failure) are brought into conflict with a properly “petty bourgeois wisdom”, “the wisdom of capital and the market” as represented by his wife Tigress who would have Xiangzi climbing up the social ladder to join the small business class (ibid., 71). In Lao She’s novel, says Jameson, this conflict is not solved but remains “an ideological double-bind, an ideological binary opposition which cannot be resolved in its own terms”, and yet the very effort to reveal and dramatize such a conflict is already a significant act with “genuine political resonance of a progressive kind” (ibid., 72).

Jameson maintains that the interaction of two narrative paradigms, the tension between an inner and an outer form, are characteristic of realist literature in general, to which Lao She’s novel properly belongs, while the more recent works of Wang Meng and Wang Wenxing (Wang Wen-hsing) can be read as indicative of the modernist and postmodernist moments in Chinese literature respectively. Jameson’s reading of the three Chinese writers in terms of modes of production and their cultural expressions...