

Introduction

Theoretical Orientation and Professional Positioning

This special issue is the fruit of a transpacific collaboration that began with an international conference held at Lingnan University of Hong Kong in the summer of 2019. In planning this special issue, I wanted a broader perspective and issued an open call for papers, hoping for a real cross section of innovative scholarship pursued by scholars of diverse theoretical interests. When all the proposals were collected, I was delighted to see not only a rich diversity of approaches but also an ideal mix of prominent, midcareer, and early-career participants. Working with these colleagues during and after the conference was a most gratifying experience as it enabled me to learn more about various critical approaches. I would like to first share my appreciation of their critical insights and then invite everyone, participants and readers alike, to consider the inevitable limitations of our theoretical and professional commitments so that we may find possible ways to overcome them.

The ten articles in this issue neatly fall into five thematic clusters. The first cluster, “Reading Ecocritically,” begins with Ban Wang’s ecocritical rereading of Lu Xun’s 魯迅 (1881–1936) rereading of the earliest Chinese cosmological myths to counter the discourse of progress and technoscientific rationality prevalent in the early twentieth century. This opening article aptly exemplifies our collective endeavor to cross boundaries between modern and premodern studies, between Western and Chinese literary and cultural theories. Just as Walter Benjamin’s (1892–1940) critique of technoscientific rationality has been reinterpreted in ecocritical terms, Wang believes, Lu Xun’s castigation of sham science and “hypocrite gentry” can and should be given an ecocritical rereading. Drawing ample evidence from Lu Xun’s early classical-style essays and tales from the collection *Gushi xinbian* 故事新編 (Old Stories Retold), Wang shows how the progenitor of modern Chinese literature reinvokes primordial human-nature bonds to combat the contemporary obsession with science, technocratic elites, and domination of nature and humans, in ways that anticipate Benjamin’s similar moves about two

decades later. Wang's ecocritical rediscovery of Lu Xun is thought provoking as it leads us to think more deeply about Lu Xun's self-positioning vis-à-vis contemporary Western thought on the one hand and traditional Chinese thought on the other.

In my view, the ecocritical bond between Benjamin and Lu Xun is by no means accidental but a consequence of their common debt to Romantic idealism. Advocated by Benjamin and other Frankfurt school critics, substantial rationality, a form of spiritual correspondence between nature and man, seems just another iteration of the Romantic conception of nature, following expositions on the human-nature relationship by post-Kantian German idealists Schelling and Hegel, Wordsworth as neo-Platonist, and others. Notably, the same Romantic idealism, its destructive-creative strain in particular, is explicitly articulated and enshrined in Lu Xun's essay "Moluo shili shuo" 摩羅詩力說 (On the Power of Mara Poetry) and seems also to undergird the unabashed celebration of "superstition" in his essay "Po e'sheng lun" 破惡聲論 (On the Refutation of Malevolent Voices).

In their common debts to Romantic idealism, Lu Xun's embrace of "superstition" corresponds in many ways to the endorsement of substantial rationality by Benjamin. Lu Xun's ecocritical stance does not constitute an about-face from his total rejection of Confucian ideology and dismissal of Daoist and Buddhist quietism. Rather, it attests to his more discriminating assessment of Chinese traditions. To this iconoclast writer and thinker, there is much that is valuable and useful in the oldest Chinese creation myths for a modern regeneration of China. Insofar as the oldest "superstitious" beliefs in the human-nature bond have not been harnessed and enervated by subsequent established philosophies and religions, they still retain man's primordial creative energy—comparable to the mara spirit or even Dionysian thrust toward the metaphysical and sublime and capable of destroying the repressive feudal order. Seen in this light, Lu Xun's ecocritical turn may be seen as revolutionary.

Winnie L. M. Yee's article is an exercise of ecocriticism on the more practical plane of urban ecology, tracing a growing awareness in Hong Kong of the human-nature bond and increasing prominence of this bond in the continual reconception of Hong Kong's identity by literary writers. By closely examining three noteworthy texts produced in the late 1970s, 1990s, and 2010s, Yee accentuates the trajectory of this gradual ecocritical development, both as a rediscovery of nature as kindred spirit and as a construction of ecotopian imaginaries for forging Hong Kong's postcolonial identity. If substantially more works were written in such an ecocritical vein, we might even go on to construct an ecocritical tradition in Hong Kong literature.

The second cluster, "Mapping the Taxonomies of Same-Sex Sexuality," consists of two articles that complement each other in both chronology and theme.

Liang Shi's article traces the evolving perceptions of male-male sexuality from antiquity through the early Republican period, as reflected in ten terms prominently used to describe intimate male-male relationships. The rise of these terms reflects two noteworthy trajectories. The first is the changing locales of male-male sexual activities from the imperial court before and during the Han dynasty, to the family compounds of high officials during the Jin and [Liu] Song dynasties, and, in Ming-Qing times, to entertainment quarters. The second is the corresponding demographic change of the two parties of this relationship: emperors and young court attendants, high officials and their servants, and patrons and entertainers. Together, these ten terms seem to constitute a unique Chinese taxonomy of male-male sexuality, characterized by an unquestionable dominance of one party over the other. This taxonomy is basically morally neutral in the sense that it implies no censure of either party. In fact, their intimacies were often romanticized and glamorized in the interest of the controlling party. To Confucian moralists, these intimacies might have seemed a harmless extension of polygamous practices that posed little threat to the sociomoral order.

Though entrenched and long-lasting, this traditional taxonomy nonetheless could not resist the onslaught of Western discourse of sodomy. By the late Qing it collapsed, and the *xianggong* houses (male brothels for males) were outlawed in 1912. By then, erstwhile open, unshamed male-male sexuality was relentlessly condemned as a disgrace for the whole nation. The vacuum left by the demise of this traditional taxonomy of male-male sexuality was quickly filled by the Western binary taxonomy of heterosexuality versus homosexuality. This newly imported taxonomy differs from the native system in three ways. First, it broadened the scope to include female-female sexuality; second, it changed the nature of taxonomy from a description of behaviors and lifestyles to a species differentiation of people in biological terms; and third, the indictment of homosexuality as perverse and pathological actually transmutes the old moral condemnation of sodomy into a *carte blanche* for coercive medical action, including the gruesome Nazi castration of gay men, to "cure" homosexuality as a disease of humanity.

While Shi's article brings us to China of the 1920s, when damning discourses of homosexuality occurred, Carlos Rojas's article fast-forwards to the Sinophone world of the mid-1990s that witnessed a surge of sympathetic literary presentations of queer individuals' self-awakening. Analyzing four famous novellas by writers from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, Rojas identifies a common trait in their texts: a persistent juxtaposing of story with journal passages, of first-person with third-person narration, of the literal with the allegorical, and of scientific discourse with expressive writing. By employing this repertoire of juxtapositions, Rojas argues, these writers show how queer individuals have ingeniously reappropriated discourses of biology, reportage, medicine, and policing—long

used to denigrate them as a diseased species—as a means of forging and narrating their queer subjectivities. On a more abstract level, Rojas takes these discursive practices as calculated moves by queer individuals to harness underlying institutional structures to create interstices for the growth of their cause.

The third cluster, “Exploring Intertextuality,” introduces two different paradigmatic uses of intertextuality for literary production and social analysis. Keru Cai’s article reads Ding Ling’s 丁玲 (1904–1986) famous 1927 novella “Shafei nüshi de riji” 莎菲女士的日記 (Miss Sophia’s Diary) through the lens of Bakhtinian dialogism, a theory of intertextuality taken up by Julia Kristeva and others. This novella is particularly suited to a Bakhtinian interpretation because it contains an explicit reference to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s (1821–1881) epistolary novel *Poor Folk*, where Bakhtin believes Dostoevsky develops the existential implications of dialogism. “Shafei nüshi de riji” operates through a sophisticated play of intertextuality of different kinds and at different levels. First, there is Ding Ling’s explicit dialogue with *Poor Folk* as she takes inspiration from its epistolary form. But there are numerous other intertextual references to a wide range of Western and Chinese literary masterworks, including Pu Songling’s 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異 (Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio), Tang Xianzu’s 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (Peony Pavilion), and Gustave Flaubert’s (1821–1880) *Madame Bovary*. Equally important are the many perspectives and voices—the core of Bakhtinian dialogism—playing out on the behavioral level: actual seeing and being seen, seeing different worlds through newspaper reports and fictional works, and talking and listening in the dialogical act of diary writing. Bakhtin considers the novel’s dialogic form to be emblematic of, or coeval with, the dialogic social world characterized by its polyphony and heteroglossia. Likewise, as noted by Cai, the promiscuous intertextuality in Ding’s novella mirrors the New Woman’s experiment with sexual promiscuity in her search for a new modern identity. Ding Ling must have perceived the social implications of Dostoevsky’s dialogism and consciously adapted it in her novella, while Bakhtin later theorized and turned the same into a prominent theoretical paradigm for both literary production and social analyses.

Kenny K. K. Ng’s article approaches intertextuality in a Bloomian vein in that he focuses on the anxiety and frustration suffered by Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896–1981) during and after the writing of his long novel *Ziye* 子夜 (Midnight) as a Chinese modern epic. But here we have a kind of anxiety of influence different from what Harold Bloom has envisioned. It arises not from the oppressive weight of overpowering literary forms established by past masters but from two opposite frameworks of intertextual reference consciously established by Mao for himself: one for emulation and one for rejection. The positive framework is that of the long novel, imagined by May Fourth authors to be an ideal epic form for modern times. This imagined novelistic epic is expected to match the poetic epic of

yore in the monumentality of form as well as the grandeur of content. For the long novel, its grandiose content is not the heroic actions of gods and superhumans but the progressive, teleological progression of history. The negative framework is that of popular urban novels represented by the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school (*Yuanyang hudie pai* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派). Jettisoning these novels' conformist formats and decadent content is a conscious endeavor evident throughout *Ziye*.

But the obstacles proved formidable for Mao and prevented him from realizing his constructive or destructive agendas. To represent the totality of the modern Chinese experience, he spared no pains to interweave multiple, often opposing cross sections of modern life, underscoring the tension between modern and traditional, industrial and rural, speed and stagnation. Yet the author found his representations of China's early modern life too incomplete to be a true epic. Similarly, his endeavor to displace popular urban novels was undermined by what Ng calls an "intertextual loophole": his unwitting use of their forms or even ideas when depicting things traditional. Ironically, as Ng suggests, all these imperfections or failures in form, bemoaned by author and critics alike, seem to match the novel's content: Chinese early modern life riven with tensions, contradictions, and clashes of all kinds.

The fourth cluster, "Inventing Comparative Strategies," features two articles showcasing new comparative strategies for studying Chinese poetics. Martin Svensson Ekström's article is a three-phase theoretical inquiry into ekphrasis (exhaustive and verbose description), grounded in the close reading of Chinese and West texts of antiquity. He starts with a study of direct, unmediated ekphrasis. Reading Mei Sheng's 枚乘 (d. 140 BCE) *fu* work "Qi fa" 七發 (Seven Stimuli) alongside book VI of Quintilian's (c. 35–c. 100 CE) *Institutio oratoria*, Ekström demonstrates how ekphrasis engenders *phantasia*, an irrational act of imagination unmediated by a conceptual process involved in metaphor making. But ironically, the ekphrasis in both cases impressed the respective audience as an unfolding of realities right before their eyes. Their visual perception of ekphrasis-engendered "realities" in turn led to actual actions in the real world: in one case, a prince rising from his sick bed to pursue a physically and spiritually wholesome life; in another, jury members reaching a guilty murder verdict. The second phase of the analysis discusses intermedial ekphrasis, an exhaustive and verbose representation of artistic objects representing real-life scenes and events. In reading Xunzi's 荀子 (c. 310–c. 235) depiction of funerary objects in his "Lilun" 禮論 (Discourse on Rituals) and Homer's (fl. ca. 8th cent. BCE) account of the shield of Achilles, Ekström probes the blurring of boundaries between representation and re-representation, between the literal and the metaphorical. Finally, he continues the discussion of metaphor with an analysis of Sima Xiangru's 司馬相如 (c. 179–c. 117) "Shanglin *fu*" 上林賦 (The Shanglin Park) as the site of an intense competition

between ekphrasis (representing hedonistic extravagance) and metaphoricity (expressive of Confucian frugality), and the question of the victor remains open.

In his conclusion, Ekström states, “It is my conviction that a Western reader, as a methodological and hermeneutical principle, ought to read Chinese texts deeply from within the Western tradition.” For him, this strategy serves as an effective corrective to the tendencies of narrowly focusing on small units of Chinese texts or comparing Chinese and Western concepts in overgeneralized terms. More important, it may yield insights into unnoticed roots of certain critical terms and concepts, such as the connection he discerns between Xunzi’s conception of funerary rituals and the Han tropological readings of *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Poetry).

This same endeavor of tracing the roots of key Chinese critical concepts over a broad cross-cultural horizon is also what I aimed to accomplish in my article. Without overt reference to Western critical theory until the final section, it is written from a framework informed by Western discourses on emotion. Careful textual and contextual analysis has enabled me to discover multiple dimensions and roots of the evolving Chinese concepts of emotion, crystallized in the multivalence of the term *qing* 情. This microinvestigation of individual texts makes possible a new macronarrative of *qing*, originating in ideas on the physical nature of things in Confucius’s time, evolving through mid-Warring States views of human nature and Han moralistic concepts of emotion, to emerge in the Six Dynasties as an aesthetic concept. In the course of this narrative, I pause to engage with Western emotion studies when they afford new insights into critical practices, as in the surprising parallel in Catherine Lutz’s anthropological study of emotional utterances on the South Pacific atoll of Ifaluk. Her discovery that, for the Ifaluk people, “talk about emotions is simultaneously talk about society—about power and politics, about kinship and marriage, and about normality and deviance,” allowed me to see that state envoys in Confucius’s time were likely operating within a similar holistic episteme when they used emotive words of the *Shijing* to communicate important political and diplomatic messages. Likewise, Han Confucian exegetes may well have been doing the same when they interpreted, often without textual evidence, *Shijing* poems as doing exactly what the Ifaluk do with their emotion words: talking “about power and politics, about kinship and marriage, and about normality and deviance.” That the Han exegesis went unchallenged until the Song points to the persistent afterlife of this holistic episteme.

The final cluster, “Positioning and Repositioning,” presents two case studies of positioning in the institutionalization of knowledge and professional alliance, respectively. Xiaolu Ma’s article investigates the emergence in China of three different positionings of the East (*dongfang* 東方) as a subject of knowledge during the 1920s, 1950s, and 1990s. Each was driven by a renewed search for China’s identity under changing circumstances of national and international politics. In the

culture debates of the 1920s, the East was often just another name for China, and Eastern culture became synonymous with traditional Chinese values as opposed to Western values. Given this, the East was a rallying point for defenders of traditional Chinese culture as much as a lightning rod for criticism by Westernization advocates. In the 1950s, thanks to the Cold War division of Eastern and Western blocs and China's alliance with the Soviet Union, the East gradually evolved into a broad geopolitical concept encompassing all countries in the Middle East and Asia, with China placed first at its center (in Soviet discourse about the Orient) and later outside it as evidenced by the exclusion of China from nascent Eastern studies programs and departments in China. Finally, the proliferation of Said's Orientalist theory in the 1990s led many Chinese intellectuals to recognize that many past Chinese discourses about the East were in fact subscribed by Western Orientalism. This recognition seems to have inspired a search for true Chinese-ness untainted by Orientalism and even calls for efforts to reclaim the right of discourse in academia and beyond.

Haiyan Lee's article reflects on the inevitable constraints and sometimes pitfalls of professional positioning by those involved in Chinese studies, as dramatically demonstrated by the old controversy surrounding Longxi Zhang's accusation against Rey Chow over her purportedly trivializing depiction of the June Fourth Tiananmen Incident in 1989. With historical distance of more than three decades, Lee goes beyond emotionally and politically charged issues of the time and perceives a clash of perspectives and methodologies stemming from the two parties' different professional positioning and allegiances. While Zhang's condemnation of Chow's account for Western media may have struck a sympathetic chord in many at the time, Lee seems bothered by his essentialist claim of the so-called Chinese reality and the intimation of his ability to adjudicate on the representation of such reality. To Lee, Chow's representations of the tragedy bespeak not so much deplorable apathy as the positionality of "a feminist postcolonial critic vis-à-vis both the West and mainland China." This positionality, Lee tells us, is inevitable as Chow chooses to join the actor-networks of Western feminist postcolonial critics who know little about Chinese culture, and where she has earned the reputation as "the face of Chinese studies." Obviously, Lee is far from giving an unqualified endorsement of Chow's position, as she notes that Chow "directs her formidable theoretical arsenal . . . while using 'China' mostly as ammunition or foil."

Lee's article seems a good choice for the conclusion of this issue. It provokes us to think about the inevitable limitations resulting from our own professional positioning. With Zhang and Chow, we are like blind people trying to figure out the elephant—the putative total reality of the subject of our inquiry. This reality is, of course, an ideal that is never fully attainable, but it still inspires us to unceasingly strive for it. Similarly, our professional positioning, whether as a

sinologist centrally engaged with Chinese literature and culture or a West-centered theorist marginally engaging China, entitles us to a privileged vantage point while condemning us to its concomitant blind spots. The same can be said of our deployment of any particular critical paradigms and methodologies.

Is there a way to mitigate the impact of these unavoidable blind spots? Yes, I believe, if we are humble enough to learn to view or understand things from positions other than our own. The tale of blind seekers and the elephant is also a lesson on the value of humility. If each blind seeker were humble enough to respect others' discoveries, they would all come to not just one partial truth but a sum of several partial truths about the elephant. The same can be said of our professional positioning: if we can respect and appreciate, with genuine humility, critical orientations and professional positionings different from our own, we may accomplish much more than we can otherwise. Longxi Zhang obviously could not see this point at the time. His cavalier and arrogant dismissal of the entire sinological field as "backwater quarters . . . beclouded by the influence of Orientalism" is deeply troubling to me. I certainly hope he has already outgrown this view. For me, it is by humbly spending decades of study and work in the "backwater quarters of sinology" that I have gained the wherewithal to pursue original scholarship grounded in rigorous textual studies and integrating Chinese and Western critical perspectives.

Speaking from my own experience, I can vouch for the enormous benefits of exploring different theoretical orientations and professional positionings at different phases of one's career. If we could leave the comfort zone of our usual theoretical and professional positions, I believe we would become better comparatists or sinologists, if not both. To put it in Bakhtinian terms, such repositioning means a move from monologism to dialogism—an appreciation and exploration of divergent perspectives, paradigms, and methodologies. It is in the spirit of this enabling dialogism that this special issue was conceived and produced. We hope it will be so read as well.

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