

Introduction

Wang Ning and Marshall Brown

It is neither the best of times nor the worst of times. China is not now in turmoil.

Still, it remains a society undergoing rapid change, and powerful winds are blowing from China toward the rest of the world. Political, economic, ecological, even, on occasion in recent years, public health concerns have been thrust from China into the Western consciousness. We, as well as literary scholars in the West, cannot stop thinking about China.

What applies in the public arena is likewise true in our discipline. Chinese universities have been modernizing and expanding with a speed and a sense of style that continually astonish us, and the humanities fields that seem under threat in the United States are full of new life there. Senior scholars who lived through the genuine turmoil of the Cultural Revolution have guided their younger colleagues and eventual successors out of that troubled era and toward the future of a world in which China is quickly recovering its rightful place. This issue of *MLQ* is offered as an introduction to representative tendencies and tensions of the moment.

Although Western scholars often hear such sensational statements as “Literature is dead,” “Literary theory is dead,” and even “The golden era of cultural theory is long past,” literary and cultural theory is flourishing in China. Every year Chinese scholars publish original theoretical works and translations of Western scholarship, organize many conferences on literary theory, and engage in discussions on issues of literary creation and criticism. There also continues to be enthusiastic debate on cutting-edge theoretical issues in the Chinese context, such as postmodernism and its critical and creative reception in China, Derridean deconstruction,

Edward Said's orientalism, Fredric Jameson's Marxist-postmodernist theory, the crisis of comparative literature and the rise of world literature, and parallel elements of cosmopolitanism in the West and in ancient China. Unfortunately, for lack of translation and critical introduction, some of these discussions are seldom heard in the outside world, like many renowned Chinese theorists or scholars, including Qian Zhongshu, Li Zehou, and Liu Zaifu. Consequently, Chinese-Western literary and cultural interaction remains largely unidirectional, with too few opportunities for balanced exchange. Almost all the important Western theorists have had their major works translated into Chinese, whereas few Chinese theorists and comparatists have published internationally or have been introduced to or translated for English-language academic circles. The present collection is meant to expand the dialogue between Chinese and Western theorists and literary scholars.

This is Wang Ning's second special issue for *MLQ*. The first, "China in the Twentieth Century" (*MLQ* 69:1, March 2008), with essays by a mix of senior and then junior (now established senior) scholars, provided an overview of the stages of imaginative creation in that historic epoch, the first decade of the new century. For the present, very different issue, Wang has organized an exchange of views between three of China's most influential scholars of literary theory and three leading Western comparatists with broad experience in China. (Liu Kang is Chinese-born and has held a prominent post at Shanghai Jiao Tong University but has been US-based since arriving in Wisconsin as a graduate student in 1982.) The issue thus offers a snapshot of cross-currents and ferment in a country that is at once absorbing and assimilating powerful influences from abroad while seeking to assert a distinctive profile on the world scene. To compete, you have to understand, but to understand, you also have to compete—to find how foreign sources resonate with and empower your native culture without letting them overpower it. Scholars in the West have hardly begun to undertake the reflection and self-reflection about their cultural positioning that these Chinese essays so forcefully communicate and that they have provoked in the Western respondents. The debate initiated here (not only here, of course, but not yet widespread) comprises position takings and critiques that repeatedly give one pause and that surely will stimulate the journal's readers.

The three essays approach from various angles the internal dynamics of the reception of Western theories in China. Zhu Liyuan's narrow-angle account of the lively responses to a single lecture by J. Hillis Miller is a case study of the spectrum of views in this cultural field. Zhu gives particular insight into the diversity of Chinese academic life today. Wang's middle focus surveys three of the most intensively received theorists over the past sixty years, showcasing their impact so as to identify the gaps and distortions in it. Because these theorists are French, Wang likewise illuminates the distortions of reception by virtue of indirect transmission through English translation. The upshot here is a profile of opportunities taken, others missed, and still others waiting in the wings. Finally, Zhang Jiang, as a central figure in China's intellectual life in the past few years, represents in his broad view fundamental drives simultaneously toward closer relationship and greater autonomy.

These essays have elicited lively critique. The three respondents evoke the kinds of disputation that occur when we differ from our smartest and most respected colleagues about the directions that our writing and teaching should take. The facts are deficient or one-sided: if only they were better thought through, these colleagues would see things our way. So we always argue, and should, yet always, and properly, we do it with the nagging awareness that we are equally partial. By debating, we come to understand what our respondents draw out, the unplumbed premises and biases in their thinking and knowledge, and ultimately, we hope, in ours.

Wang Ning and Marshall Brown, who thank each other for the enthusiastic interest and efficient work that made this special issue possible, hope that it will attract more critical and scholarly attention to Chinese literature and China's literary theory studies.