Reading East Asian Writing The Limits of Literary Theory

Review >
East Asia

Over the past two decades, scholarship on East Asian, and in particular on Chinese literature has been transformed by the application of Western critical theory. From being the exception, theoretically informed approaches have become increasingly prevalent. Although old-fashioned, plain-speaking humanistic criticism has far from disappeared, the work of scholars such as Rey Chow and Lydia H. Liu has had a significant impact on the field and on upcoming generations of researchers.

By Julia Lovell

he jury is still out on the implica-The jury is sun out of tions of these developments, and on the applicability of critical theory to literatures and cultures so distant from those of the West. Is this Western cultural imperialism that imposes its own misunderstandings on East Asian literature? Does the application of Western theories to East Asian literature welcome 'marginal' literatures into the modern, Western global canon at the expense of 'local' critical approaches, thereby keeping non-Western literatures and critical practices culturally subordinate to the West? Not unimportantly, does 'theoryspeak' tend to produce frustratingly obfuscating analysis?

These, and other relevant questions, have been raised in various public forums since the early 1990s. *Reading East Asian Writing* is the latest contribution to this debate, drawing together thirteen scholars of Chinese and Japanese literature to consider the question: does Western literary theory work in East Asia?

The contributors vary widely in their approach to the issue. Some plunge straight in with practical applications of theory to specific works of literature; others concentrate on theoretical structures inherent within the organization and study of literature; again others consider the uses and pitfalls of critical theory. Rey Chow, the doyenne of theoretical analyses of modern Chinese literature, takes a direct approach, draw-

ing together a short story by the modern Chinese writer Lao She and texts by Walter Benjamin, in order to illuminate the complexities of Lao She's position as a patriotic, nation-loving author. Haruo Shirane, by contrast, uncovers the theoretical assumptions behind canon formation in Japanese literary history

Later chapters grapple with the relevance of specific theoretical schools and thinkers to East Asian literature, such as Derrida, Kristeva and new historicism. Two essays are devoted to the application of the sociological ideas of Pierre Bourdieu to Chinese and Japanese literature. Michel Hockx finds that, in studying the 1920s and 1930s literary scene, Bourdieu's ideas about position-taking and strategies of accumu-

lating cultural capital shed helpful analytical light on the behaviour of the avant-garde literati of that time. Hockx also notes, however, that the usefulness of Bourdieu's theories is diminished on considering the strong impulse to collective, as opposed to individually distinctive, action within modern Chinese literature

Stephen Dodd's essay offers a valuably personal view of the function of theory. Instead of regarding literary theory as a tool for the critic to achieve a quasi-scientific objectivity (one of the aims that fuelled its genesis in the twentieth century), Dodd asserts that 'everyone is involved in some kind of theoretical position'. While established literary theory can offer a stimulating smorgasbord of choices, it is crucial that the critic maintains a flexible self-awareness of the personal intellectual baggage he or she brings to a text.

Dodd's thoughtful perspective is representative of the balanced, non-polemical tone that unites these essays, whose authors never diverge from careful, rea-

soned argument. More ruminative than conclusive, this stimulating collection offers a wide-ranging discussion of questions to which there can be no definitive answers.

- Hockx, Michel and Ivo Smits (eds), Reading East Asian Writing: The Limits of Literary Theory, London: RoutledgeCurzon (2003), pp. 299, ISBN 0-7007-1760-9

Reference

- Chow, Rey, Woman and Chinese Modernity: The politics of reading between West and East, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1991).
- Liu, Lydia H., Translingual Practice: Literature, national culture and translated modernity China, 1900-1937, Stanford: Stanford University Press (1995).

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The Buddha's Moon Reflected on a Thousand Rivers

Review >
Korea

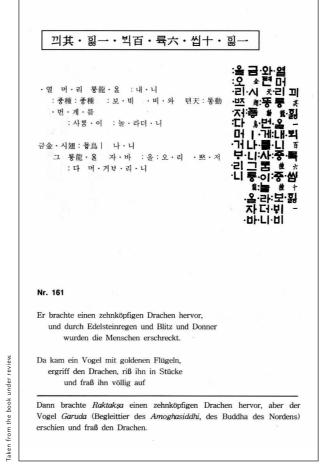
The illustrious ruler, King Sejong the Great (reigned 1418-1450 at the beginning of the Korean Yi Dynasty, 1392-1910) personally supervised various scientific projects in the fields of sinology, medicine, astronomy, and geography. However, modern Koreans remember him for having invented their national alphabet, now called han'gŭl. His son, Prince Suyang, used this brand-new alphabet to compose the 'Detailed Record of the Buddha's Life' (Sŏkpo sangjŏl), commissioned by his father in honour of the Prince's mother, the beloved Queen Sohŏn who had died in 1445. He submitted this first work of prose in the Korean language to his father in 1447. It was compiled from translations of Chinese Buddhist sutras, and King Sejong used it as source for his poetic version, the 'Song of the Moon Reflected on a Thousand Rivers' (Wŏrinch'ŏn'gangjigok, 1449).

By Allard M. Olof

he song is composed of cantos of two verse lines, except the first canto which consists of one line only. It opens with lyrical verses, followed by tales of earlier lives of the Buddha and his career in our world, and the whole story is full of supernatural events. In 1459, when Prince Suyang ruled as King Sejo, he had the two works combined in a new edition, but in the course of time large parts of the works have gone missing, due to the low status of Buddhism in the Yi period, when neo-Confucianism was the state ideology. Tantalizingly, the meaning of one section of the song (cantos 76-78) still remains obscure, as the prose part, Sŏkpo sangjŏl, which would probably explain it, has not yet been found. From the 1960s onwards, many volumes and parts of Buddhist books were recovered in Korea: in libraries, monasteries, including a dilapidated stupa, and private homes. Now, 550 years after its completion, the first volume of the Song of the Moon (volumes two and three are only partly recovered) has finally been translated, not in English, but in German. The translators, Werner Sasse, an established authority in Korean linguistics, and his colleague at Hamburg University, An Jung-Hee, laboured for five years to produce this rare translation of a Middle Korean literary work.

The layout of this translation is very attractive. Every canto is given in facsimile of the original, flanked by a version in modern print; the translation follows below, together with an explanation of the contents. As this translation is not just intended for a German-reading public interested in exotic literature but, foremost, as a textbook for students of classical Korean, the second part of the book explains grammatical forms and vocabulary. Sasse and An have produced a very readable translation, in a poem-like form, quite close in content to the original text. The Korean verses are composed of parallel phrases containing a certain number of syllables (between 5 and 12), which cannot easily be imitated in German. In the preface the translators humbly speak of their

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clumsy (*ungemein holpriger*) style. Proper names that are not mentioned in the original text have been added for clarity, as fifteenth-century Koreans presumably understood the verses without the names. Sometimes the original Indic form is given; sometimes the meaning of the name is translated into German. For me personally, translating *Wangsasŏng* as

'Königshausen' renders the impression that the action had shifted to the borders of the Rhine. It is all a matter of taste which language one prefers, but I believe the Korean form does the original Korean more justice.

As mentioned earlier, the book is meant for students, and offers a lot of explanation. But not all is settled in the fields of background or grammar. The explanation of the magical fight between Sariputra and Raktasa (pp. 157-164) is very cleverly worked (notwithstanding that Amitabha is mistakenly branded Buddha of the East, see p. 160). The grammatical forms are extensively analysed, but it is a pity Sasse and An abstained from any explanation of the fascinating phenomenon of the 'side-dots' in Middle Korean texts that indicate 'pitch levels'. The authors do, however, mention the 'pitches' a few times when they influence grammatical forms. The appearances of the -o/u- verbal infix in Middle Korean are, also, as colourful as they are troublesome. One function of o/u- occurs in modifier forms when the modified noun can be seen as object of the modifying verb. The authors call this form 'Faktitiv/Passiv' (p. 381), 'Volitiv' (p. 384), or declare it hard to explain (p.451); perhaps it would have been better to follow one uniform explanation of the form.

Professor Sasse has also been studying the structure of the Song of the Moon, which unfortunately is not treated in the book discussed here. I look forward to a publication on this aspect sometime in the future. In the meantime, the English-reading public will have to wait for an English translation of this old Korean version of the life of the Buddha.

- Sasse, Werner, and Jung-Hee An, Der Mond gespiegelt in tausend Flussen. Das Leben des Buddha Gautama in Verse gesetzt im Jahre 1447 von Konig Sejong, Seoul: Sohaksa Verlag (2002), pp. 469 + 18, ISBN 89-7191-212-X

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1 e.g. the 'Song of Dragons Rising to Heaven' (Yongbiöch'ön'ga), 1447; translated twice in the 1970s, by J. Hoyt in 1971 (and 1979), and by Peter H. Lee in 1975.