Reflections on cross-cultural literary contact: The reception of American critical discourse in Taiwan in the 1970s

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This paper examines the phenomenon of cross-cultural theory transmissions, with particular reference to the reception of American critical theory in Taiwan since the late 1960s. Rather than being an empiricistic narrative, the paper has several meta-critical tasks to perform. It reviews the present status of ‘Third World’ area studies by questioning their blurring of systems as well as ignoring the functions of linguistic and scriptorial coding. It further examines some available communication models, discusses the functions of coding in intra-system and transcoding in inter-systems, and, finally, gives a meta-critical account of Taiwan’s reception of American critical theory and practice in the last two decades. The paper therefore has its socio-political situatedness. It is intended as a critique of the subservient status accorded to literature in a ‘developing’ society, such as Taiwan, where economic and technological modernization is always on top of state technocrats’ agenda. While modernization in Taiwan is primarily modeled on the United States, literary studies have unwittingly followed suit, observing the laws of anachronism and availability, which characterize cross-cultural literary reception.

1. Literary system and beyond

Literature is a subsystem of the polystem of culture. Within a microscopic synchronic phase, this subsystem enters into complicated, dynamic relationships with the other subsystems—complicated because their relationships are not always parallel and corresponding, but are dialectic, conflicting, full of gaps and ruptures. The ideal homology among various subsystems and between parts and whole is a dated classical construct. In the diachronic perspective, conceptualized as a multiplicity of synchronic phases that do not always succeed one another in the mechanical temporal order, the change (by no means in the sense of evolution) of one subsystem, say, economy or politics, needs not affect another subsystem, such as literature. The assumption that the infrastructure affects suprastructure reveals only a simplistic version of economic determinism. Such an assumption fails to perceive that the so-called infra- and suprastructures, even if the dichotomy could hold at all, are both theoretical constructs and models-bound, and their inherent self-regulating mechanism puts into question a primacy/secondariness relationship between them.

Thus the analyst of a cultural polystem sets upon himself a two-fold task: on the one hand, to articulate the ‘global’ system of culture which is always capable of self-dismantling by virtue of its discrete conflicting elements; on the other, to account for the change of this subsystem within(out) the (un)change of the polystem. Furthermore, as a discursive procedure, the articulation is always jeopardized by other sets of competing discourse. Itamar Even-Zohar has recently put it, ‘[I]n order to fulfill its needs, a system actually strives to avail itself of a growing inventory of alternative options’ (1990: 26). One could say that, given the analyst’s perceptual and interpretive model, these discursive options are hardly available at once, but are subject to paradigmatic substitution. Only from a meta-theoretical and macroscopic vantage point can one make all these options available.
The analyst’s task is made even more complicated when two cultural systems are confronted with each other. Take the diachronic perspective for example. Here the development of a closed cultural system from within gives way to cross-cultural contacts from without. Thus change takes place both on the endogenous and exogenous levels. It remains controversial, however, whether purely external factors alone can cause internal change.

In describing cross-cultural contacts, the analyst is faced with the difficult task of taking sides, of adopting a position from which cultural transactions are perceived and interpreted. Whatever his position is, the analyst is often implicated, especially when he is involved in the process he sets to describe. It may be argued, as by the world-system theorist, that the center-periphery dichotomy no longer holds because both the center and the periphery participate in a global, interdependent dynamic process. But this does not suggest that the analyst can be a value-free observer who assumes a transcendental stance precisely because his field is the geographical transfer of value (Soja 1989: 112).

2. Reflections on present status of ‘Third World’ studies

The aforesaid is a theoretical outline of this paper on the reception of Anglo-American critical theories in Taiwan in the 1970s. Before undertaking my survey, a polemic concerning the present status of area studies is in order.

A glance at current ‘Third World’ area studies, in this case post-war Taiwan, shows that attention is often drawn to the region’s socio-politico-economic developments while only lip service is paid to its ‘cultural’ aspects. The assumption underlying this biased choice of subject matter is the problematic dichotomy between infrastructure and suprastructure and their subordinating relation. It is precisely this dichotomy that legitimizes the distinction between, say, the production and consumption of literature, and other spheres of activities, such as economy and politics, as if the latter were not part of culture. Viewed from this narrow perspective, a complex cultural polysystem that involves multiple subsystems is reduced to the economic infrastructure which determines various cultural activities on a higher level. Thus we have the popular notion of society as subtext which generates the literary text.

This determinism leads to two condescending attitudes towards literature. First, as surplus value whose social function is ornamental or, in a patronized sense, elevating humanity, literature is dispensable and disposable. Second, literature is reduced to the subservient status of mimesis, reflecting, faithfully or imperfectly, the socio-politico-economic conditions in which it is produced and consumed. In short, literature is seen as the verbalized, hence mediated, appearance doomed with a nostalgia, forever aspiring to a pre-verbalized, unmediated, and transparent social reality. Or put in the trendy ethnographical parlance, literature is viewed as the other (l’autre); in the jargon of political economics, the periphery.

If literature is viewed as the other, who is then the viewer that claims to be self (le moi)? If it is on the periphery, what is then at the center? One is tempted to say: ‘Why, those who do not do literature, such as the scientist, the social scientist, and particularly the policy making and implementing technocrat, whose fields are always on top of the agenda in a modern developing state’. But I would argue that the answer is but another appearance. The technocrat is only enunciating a discourse of exclusion without his own awareness. Such a discourse, in its various formulations of
development theory in the wake of World War II, is based on a self/other, core/periphery differentiation. That is, the developed countries in the West as self looking not disinterestedly at their Asian and African latecomers as other though as ‘potential allies in a bipolar world’ (Bloomström and Hettne 1984: 8). These ‘Third World’ countries exist only in the discourse that shapes them—a discourse, that is, supported by the ‘First World’ viewer’s power and desire and his will to truth, as Edward Said powerfully argues in his Orientalism.

Therefore, in representing the phenomenon of literature in post-war Taiwan, one has to deconstruct a discourse of exclusion. This discourse of exclusion is, on the one hand, based on the dichotomizing concept of core/periphery, where Taiwan is peripherized or semi-peripherized, and on the other hand, supported by the hierarchy of primacy/secondariness, where literature is considered as parasitic to other cultural (i.e., ‘non-cultural’) strata, such as economic and political orders. Unless this double otherness imposed on literature is dismantled one cannot sensibly talk about literature.

Let me allude to a recent study on cross-cultural literary transmission to show the limits of social sciences models when applied to literary studies. In their case study of the Nigerian romance novel, Wendy Griswold and Misty Bastian (1987) identify five available theories regarding the transmission of cultural elements from one society to another. It is important to note that the two societies under discussion would be labeled respectively the First World and the Third World, and the transmission is one-track, i.e., the First World (vaguely termed as Western) as the sender of cultural products (in this case a literary genre) and the Third World (Nigeria) the receiver. The identity and situatedness of the sender and receiver—not to mention the authors themselves—serve as a good pretext for the authors to make use of the following theories: (1) modernization, (2) hegemony, (3) technological determinism, (4) syncretism, and (5) local cultural traditions. I have rearranged the authors’ original order (i.e., 1, 4, 2, 3, 5) because to me 1, 2, and 3 belong together in their shared concern with cultural values (especially non-literary ones) of the core states as sender, and only 4 and 5 demonstrate the functions of local values of the peripherized state.

The authors evoke the three theories—modernization, hegemony, and technological determinism—not to argue for the values of core states, but to show their overwhelming power on peripherized societies. These three approaches, for all their distinctions and various formulations, fall into the general paradigm of modernization hegemony. As interpretive models, they are indeed relevant to literature. Their relevancy is twofold: mimesis and determinism. On the one hand, modernization or technological hegemony or clash of values can be chosen as the subject matter of the literary text or ‘represented’ therein. Hence the authors’ observation that the phenomenon of the rise of individualism in a modernized society is likely to receive more representation in literature. A different but related kind of relevancy would be these models’ appropriation to explain literary genetics, i.e., the assumption that cultural change begets new genres. For example, the dominance of media, such as newspapers and TV, results in increasing quantity of commercialized feuilleton literature and soap opera.

However, neither the ‘classical’ concept of mimesis nor the ‘vulgar’ Marxist concept of determinism, in crossing the boundaries among subsystems, is capable of explaining the complex activities in the literary system. Such a system, according to Schmidt (1980, 1981, 1983, 1990a,b), comprises the acting roles of production, mediation/distribution, reception, and postprocessing, and their interrelations. This
self-referential’ and ‘self-organizing’ nature underlies the literary system as well as the other systems. As construct of world-model, each in its own right is judged by its theoretical foundations, including epistemology, meta-theory, and object-theory (Schmidt 1983), and there cannot be primacy of one system over another. Schmidt (1990a) has argued convincingly that in terms of intersubjectivity, theoreticity, and methodicity, there is no borderline that separates one discipline from another; the borderline, if at all, rather ‘cuts off types of problem solving’. The lack of disciplinary borderline, to be sure, does not suggest that there cannot be relations and interactions among systems. But as Schmidt observes, although in the long run intersystemic interactions do have certain effects on the environment as a whole, systems in themselves are ‘operationally closed’ and ‘cannot shape each other intentionally and causally’ (1990b: 394).

3. Problematics of linguistic and scriptorial coding in the literary system

What, then, is vital to the literary system’s internal modus operandi? Schmidt’s argument cited above is powerful enough to dispel the myth of inter-systemic causality. But given the prevalent misconception of literature among social scientists and technocrats in Taiwan, I would like to reiterate that socio-economic determinism fails to account for, among other things, a fundamental factor that governs the production and consumption of literature, namely, linguistic and literary coding. Coding is to be sure a complicated language phenomenon, for it involves multiple levels, such as the primary modeling system of language and script, the secondary modeling system of literature, and transcoding on both the expression and content, linguistic and scriptorial and literary levels. What is more, it always implicates the addressee and addressee that participate in literary pragmatics.

It would be naive to rehearse the semiotic commonplace of code. Nor would I reinstate the already problematized entity of an isolated, ontological ‘text’. Suffice it to point out that the concept of code is essential to any serious discussion of the cultural and literary system because it implicates all the acting roles in communication. It is all the more relevant to literary transmission. Let me make a historical excursion before returning to the function of code in literary signification and communication.

The patriarchs of French comparatists in the 1930s-50s, in particular, Paul Van Tieghem, postulated the cross-cultural communication process constituted by the temporal and causal relationships among the sender (émitteur), agent (intermédiaire), and receiver (récepteur) (1931). However, motivated by historical positivism and lacking a rigorous linguistic model, the comparatistes did not bother, nor were they able, to explain the role which language plays in literary transfers.

The French comparatist’s conceptualization of cross-cultural reception can be schematized as in figure 1. The italicized terms refer to the respective meta-systems devoted to different objects of study. While crenology studies the

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\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{sender} & \rightarrow & \text{agent} & \rightarrow & \text{receiver} \\
\text{source} & & & & \\
\text{crenology} & & & & \text{doxology}
\end{array}
\]

Fig. 1.
receiver’s literary source and doxology the fortune of the sender, mesology deals with the mediating function performed by the agent, such as the translator. It is obvious that in this over-simplified scheme not only the literary text’s signification process fails to be represented, but the text itself is altogether missing.

Thus the diagram could be tentatively revised as figure 2. Now text 1 is framed in the language code of the sender, say, English. And the same text 1 can be transmitted to the receiver in the original language or, through the agent’s transcoding, received as text 2, say, in Chinese. Finally, the receiver in turn produces text 3. This revised diagram can be used to explain the phenomenon of literary influence, running the gamut from translation, adaptation, positive and negative imitation (i.e., stylization and parody), to relatively independent work that bears resemblance to the source. The process applies to cross-cultural reception of almost all genres, including critical discourse, though the latter’s relation to the other levels of discourse, such as the poetic and novelistic ones, is one between meta-language and object-language.

Apparently, both figures 1 and 2 have somewhat simplified the matter for their unwitting by-passing of language signification. As has been often asserted, communication is but the secondary semiotic procedure, whose basis is signification. One of the contributions of Jakobson’s classical communication model (1960), compared with figure 1, is its drawing the critic’s attention to the micro-structure of code, in which the message is framed and through whose institutionalization successful communication is made possible.

I shall briefly dwell, in the manner of digression, on a relatively overlooked aspect of code in cross-cultural literary transmission, especially when it involves the respective language socialization in Taiwan and the United States. Sufficient discussion has been devoted to the primary modeling system of language and the secondary modeling system of literature as well as the phenomenon of their intra-systemic transcoding. What I would point out is that the primary modeling system is not restricted to the linguistic levels of phonology, syntax, and semantics. There is also a fundamental scriptorial model which maps onto the system of literature and thus serves to undermine the linguistic model that has dominated the majority of post-Saussurian theories of text.

This scriptorial model, parallel to the linguistic one, also consists of an expression-level and a content-level. Its signification involves the complex process of transformation from the basic graphemic level, through the higher levels of morphographeme, graph, graphosyntagm, to semantics. These are further subsumed by a socialized scriptorial-literary pragmatics, implicating the four acting roles proposed by Schmidt. Like language, this script-oriented literary pragmatics is culture-specific. As such, it has profound ideological, pedagogical, and socio-psychological implications which cannot be easily dismissed. Ideology, pedagogy, and social praxis put aside, I can think of several reasons why the scriptorial model should be put anew on the meta-theoretical agenda of literature system.

First of all, theoretically and functionally, there is no reason why the graphemic model cannot be applied to the description of all kinds of written text, including the
so-called ‘oral’ but (à la Derrida) ‘always already’ written text, in the same way as the linguistic model has been applied to various kinds of literary ‘discourse’. Secondly, the graphemic model will eventually lead to a typology of texts or genre theory, having identified the alphabetical (e.g., English), syllabary (e.g., Japanese), or logographical (e.g., Chinese) nature of the text which is (being) transmitted across cultural boundaries. The importance of the individuating quality of a scriptorial text cannot be over-emphasized. I shall cite only one instance to show what literary consequences our cognition of the scriptorial code might bear. Experiments in cognitive psychology have shown that lateralization of human brain in processing different scriptorial texts is different. It has been asserted that tachistoscopic recognition of phonetic-based scripts tends to show a right visual field-left hemisphere (RVF-LH) superiority effect, recognition of logographic symbols, such as Chinese, tends to show a left visual field-right hemisphere (LVF-RH) superiority effect (Tzeng et al. 1979, Wang 1981). Results of such studies might lead one to reconceptualize, among other things, the higher order of generic code based on the scriptorial code. A test case would be the semanticization and syntaxization of Chinese poetry, a topic I cannot deal with here.

The hierarchical relationship between the scriptorial (and linguistic) subcodes and the literary subcodes only represents partially the complexity of signification. Nor is the code alone sufficient in performing communication. Jakobson’s scheme has been constantly modified, for critics assert that it either fails to reflect the reality of communication (Eco 1976, 1979) or fails to account for the socio-economic dimensions of ‘contact’ and the institutional force of ‘context’, both being instrumental in making successful communication possible (Itamar Even-Zohar 1990).

I shall refer to the revised model of Eco (1976, 1979) to show the function of code in literary communication. Compared with the classical model of Jakobson, the revised one is more heuristic. First of all, the term ‘message’ has been replaced by a neutral but differentiating term ‘text’, as was already used in figure 2. The text should be first encoded by the sender whose performance presupposes a command of various linguistic/scriptorial/literary codes and subcodes; it then will be decoded (i.e., interpreted) by the addressee (i.e., receiver) who shares with the sender identical codes and subcodes (i.e., linguistic, scriptorial, and literary competence). The element of contact in Jakobson’s axis is taken over by channel, which can be extended further to the addressee. In addition to shared codes, the channel serves as a vehicle for text transmission by means of, say, orality, literacy, vis-à-vis presentation, publication, and, above all, the mediation of institutions. Finally, Eco’s model makes the textual distinction between the expression (signifier) and content (signified) planes, apparently borrowed from Hjelmlev (1943; English 1961). Such a distinction helps clarify the relationship between sender and receiver, signification and communication. And more importantly, it makes us aware of the role played by the reader, through whose ‘philological’ effort a received text can be interpreted and reconstructed.

4. Transcoding in cross-cultural inter-literary systemic contact

However, actual communication never takes place in an ideal situation or a vacuum. Since my topic is reception, I will dwell a little on the problems aroused by the receiver. According to Eco, the addressee’s interpretation is affected by several
‘aberrant’ factors, including his private codes and ideological biases. Besides, the ‘real patrimony’ of the addressee’s knowledge is not the knowledge he supposedly shares with the sender. Therefore, the decoded text (message-content) is not expected to coincide with the encoded text (message-expression). This is especially true in cross-cultural communication. As Eco puts it, ‘Sometimes the addressee’s entire system of cultural units (as well as the concrete circumstances in which he lives) legitimate[s] an interpretation that the sender would have never foreseen’ (1976: 141). Other times, the sender’s message is received as noise which produces a new culture (p. 142).

That the addressee and the addressee would encode and decode differently the same ‘text’ — a better word would be Schmidt’s KOMMUNIKATE (1980: 532) — is due to the different modes of action organized in their respective LITERATURE-systems. As Schmidt puts it, ‘Any recipient constructs his own KOMMUNIKAT related to a given TEXT in a receptional situation’ (1980: 534). This testifies to what Schmidt describes as literature’s polyvalence convention (1980: 543; 1983: 28). By virtue of this convention, the addressee is deprived of control over his KOMMUNIKAT so that it can be prevented from being appropriated first as a TEXT and then as another KOMMUNIKAT, and the addressee is able to enjoy the freedom of postprocessing his own KOMMUNIKAT. An advantage of Schmidt’s communication model over the earlier ‘static’ ones is its displacement of the passive information process into a theory of action. Hence, the discourse-oriented addresser and addressee in Jakobson’s scheme are replaced by the acting roles of producer and post-processor. If one compares Eco’s configuration with Schmidt’s outline of theory-net (1983: 29), one will immediately notice that the acting role of mediator, which is essential to cross-cultural communication, is altogether missing in Eco. Thus from Van Tieghem (figure 1) to Schmidt, our discussion of cross-cultural literary transmission has come full circle, but we have arrived at a far more rigorous and systematic vantage point.

The discrepancy between the producer’s and post-processor’s KOMMUNIKATE reminds us of the once popular concept of negative influence in comparative literature (Balakian 1962). Through critical elaboration in the sixties and seventies (Hankiss 1964, Weisstein 1973, Hermerén 1975, Primeau 1977), the now obsolete term has obtained two distinct but related meanings. According to the first definition, the receiver ‘misreads’ the sender’s message. Granting that all readings are misreadings, a provisional distinction can be made here between ‘intentional’ and ‘unintentional’ misreadings. The intentional misreading is done with a polemic thrust by the receiver as post-processor in order to negate the influence of his model (text 1); the result (text 2) of his transcoding often appears as a parody or a Brechtian counter-design of the original. The unintentional misreading takes place when the receiver, often a post-processing mediator, lacks sufficient linguistic and literary competence to ‘reconstruct,’ as Eco would have it, the sender’s code. Under such circumstances, the mediator’s (receiver 1 = sender 2) transcoded product (e.g., translations as text 2) would engender for receiver 2 a mirage of text 1. This happens to be the case of Taiwan’s reception of American New Criticism in the late sixties.

The second definition of negative influence involving two literary systems is more relevant to our discussion. Receiver 1 (agent or mediator) introduces into his own culture a foreign model (text 1), often adulterated through transcoding (text 2), as a challenge to his immediate predecessors or conservatives in his own literary tradition. In this instance, what receiver 1 rebels against is his own literary heritage
and/or rivalry or the dominating ‘normal science’ rather than his transcoded model (text 1). A notable example took place in Taiwan in the early 1970s, where the traditionalist (receiver 2) and the mediator (receiver 1 = agent = sender 2) of Western critical discourse staged a keen fight in the academy.

5. Cross-cultural theory transmission: A test case from Taiwan

Unlike the transmission of other literary genres, such as the poetic or novelistic discourse, that of a critical discourse engages the mediator (receiver 1 or sender 2) in a special kind of hermeneutic enterprise which gives rise to his confrontation with interpreters of opposing camps. The reaction of the traditionalist (receiver 2) is all the more vehement. The difference between the critical discourse and other kinds of discourse lies in that the former serves as a meta-language which not only provides an interpretive alternative for an already well-defined object-language, but more often than not completely reconstructs the object-language in a revolutionary way. Therefore, any such new approach is held suspicious because of its supposed trespassing on a ‘forbidden field’ (Yen 1976: 80). For example, in the late sixties and early seventies, when Yen Yüan-shu introduced (though somewhat belatedly and in a vulgarized manner) the theory and practice of the New Criticism to Taiwan, the overall reaction of the traditional scholars was strongly defensive (Yeh 1973).

The traditionalist stance was epitomized by Yeh Chia-ying, who had been formerly a professor of Chinese at National Taiwan University but at that time taught at the University of British Columbia in Canada. Yeh’s critique is primarily directed at Yen’s application of introduced analytical method to classical Chinese poetry—a body of literature which is not only framed in its own linguistic and literary codes, but is governed (i.e., protected) by a set of prescribed interpretive procedures, in this case, philological exegesis charged with ‘appreciative’ fallacy. To Yeh and the other traditionalists, Yen as addressee of Chinese poetry does not have the required literary competence to properly decode the text. When the decoded text as message-content does not ‘match’ the encoded text as message-expression, communication becomes problematic, and the addressee’s interpretation is dismissed as nothing but ‘noise’ (Eco). One could say the lack of intersubjectivity lies more between competing hermeneutic schools than between a third-century poet-addresser and his distant twentieth-century critic-addressee. What is incompatible here is rather two contemporary critics’ rivaling KOMMUNIKATE instead of a classical TEXT and a modern receiver’ KOMMUNIKAT. At first glance, the kind of interpretive contention between Yeh and Yen does not make much sense. A meta-critical study might test their theoretical assumptions and rigor in persuasion as well as reveal the institutional force behind their interpretations. What’s relevant to our purpose here, however, is the fact that incommensurability between intracultural systems results, at least partially, from that between cross-cultural systems (Merrell 1985).

The same story can be told from a different perspective. Here the communication involves the dialectic relationship between the object-language and the meta-language. As can be shown in figure 2, Yen the addressee of an alien (i.e., transcoded on both expression and content levels) meta-language plays the role of the mediator (sender 2) who in turn conveys the message to a second addressee (e.g., Yeh). Now since addressee 2 is already preoccupied with a ‘meta-language’
(which, incidently, has never existed in China except a transparent object-language not to be ravished), he has to either receive another meta-language as ‘noise’ or simply dismiss it for fear that it will eventually endanger or destroy the forbidden object-language. In his reaction against cross-cultural transmission of critical discourse, the second addressee’s final resort is always the dubious concept of ‘tradition’, without the tragic awareness that tradition is not a given, but a construct, not an answer, but ‘arguable formulations for arguable ends’ (Layoun 1988: 56). Rather than being the addressee himself, the addressee is imbedded in his interpretive horizon from which he produces his KOMMUNIKAT. Lacking such self-reflection, the traditionalist has formulated an axiological discourse which legitimitizes himself as, pace Lotman, ‘the internal bearer’ of culture while reducing the mediator of a borrowed critical discourse as the alienated observer (Lotman and Uspenskij 1984: 3, Portis-Winner 1984: 28-29). The fallacy of this kind of essentialism is not worth refuting because, as Schmidt puts it, ‘the logic of the observer is isomorphic to the logic of the observed’ (1990a; see also Chang 1990).

6. The reception and post-processing of American criticism in Taiwan in the 1970s

That Yen became the target of traditionalists in their conflict of interpretation in the early seventies was partly due to Yen’s militant character and partly to his powerful influence on his students. An important reason for the strong currency immediately gained by the analytical method which Yen promulgated was the force of institution. Unlike the other cultural phenomena, the arena of critical debate is often confined to the academy and its influence is hardly felt by the world beyond—though in Taiwan literary cénacles and the media sometimes get involved. In addition to the various graduate programs where Yen and his colleagues taught, a few literary journals have provided forum for the transmission of Anglo-American critical theories. The most important one is arguably Chung-Wai Literary Monthly, a journal published by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at the National Taiwan University. Through the joint effort of Yen and his students, the practice of textual analysis favored by the New Critics began to flourish and take root in the academy.

It would be mistaken and misleading to say that the New Criticism, for all its dated but overwhelming popularity, was the only critical trend introduced into Taiwan in the late sixties and early seventies. While Yen was publishing his practical criticism of poetry in Chung-Wai and other journals, at least two other critical approaches were being ushered in. One was the so-called myth and archetypal criticism; the other, lacking a better name, can be provisionally termed the linguistic approach.

In all fairness, the introduction of myth criticism to Taiwan should be attributed to Hou Chien. An erudite classicist by training and equally well versed in both Chinese and Western literary concepts, Hou was particularly interested in the Neo-Aristotelian school’s theory of the novel (e.g., Ronald S. Crane and Wayne C. Booth) and the archetypal criticism represented by Northrop Frye. In 1973-74, Hou wrote and published in Chung-Wai three articles on Chinese narrative, in which he experimented with archetypal and psychoanalytical hermeneutics (1973a,b, 1974). Along with Yen’s intrinsic method, Hou’s cross-cultural hermeneutics was to influence the young generation well into the late seventies when both were superseded by other critical persuasions.
This is not the occasion to assess the merits and drawbacks of the New Criticism and myth criticism. But before turning to the linguistic approach I shall make a couple of minor comments. Under the aegis of ‘formalism’, the New Criticism deals primarily with the semantic aspect of the literary text, hence its interest in the language of paradox, plurisignation, tension (intension and extension), while ignoring the global structure of language as the first-order modeling system. Harboring the vision of literary autonomy, it is concerned with how these heterogeneous/ homogeneous semantic elements are related and structured into an organic unity. Compared with its Continental counterpart, i.e., formalist-structuralism in the wake of Saussurean linguistics, the Anglo-American New Criticism suffers from impressionism and psychologism precisely because it lacks a rigorous linguistic model. Rather than being a meta-language in the strict sense, the New Criticism, defined by its seeming interiority to a single work, is at best a type of ‘commentary’ (Todorov 1977: 235). A similar critique can be launched at the myth and archetypal criticism. Thematically oriented, it claims anthropological (hence literary?) constants, but it has never succeeded nor even attempted to solve the problematic of textuality. For instance, the system of modes and genres formulated by Frye is not a functional and logical typology, but a grand narrative of myth.

Observing, as it were, the law of anachronism in literary reception, the New Criticism and myth criticism held sway over Taiwan’s foreign literature programs in the seventies. But at the same time when they began to take hold, theoretical inquiries into the nature and function of language in relation to literature were already under way. The major contributor was Huang Hsüan-fan, Professor of Linguistics at National Taiwan University. In a series of articles published in Chung-Wai since 1973, Huang addresses several problems in the philosophy of languages, such as the cognitive foundation of metaphor, the logical status of emotive language, theory of meaning and reference, speech act theory, etc. (1973a,b, 1974, 1975, 1981, 1983a,b). His articles published before the mid-seventies had received little, if any, attention by ‘literary’ critics mainly because of the latter’s narrow provincialism and over-weening self-complacency (e.g., the assertion that literature and linguistics belong to two distinct and unrelated fields). Huang’s contribution was not recognized until structuralism and post-structuralism began to emerge in the late seventies and early eighties.

My narrative of the reception of Anglo-American theories could continue to include later trends. Since the late seventies, phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, deconstruction, Neo-Marxism, and various versions of feminism, reader-response criticism, and new historicism—all these trends have been precipitating on the local academy with accelerated velocity. A casual glance of the M.A. theses produced in the last ten years would not fail to miss names like Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, De Man, Althusser, Kristeva, Bakhtin, Iser, Jauss, Lyotard, Habermas, Schmidt, etc. A more rigorous empirical study, with the assistance of statistics and literary sociology, would hopefully establish the LITERATURE-system of the time.

Given time and given a macroscopic point of view, one could still talk about paradigm shifts, one in every ten years perhaps. Take the United States for example. The New Criticism dominated the pedagogy of literature in the 40s-50s. When its various assumptions began to be challenged from different angles by, say, Northrop Frye, Richard E. Palmer, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Paul de Man, and Stanley Fish, it was soon replaced by new contending theories. The myth criticism that followed the
New Criticism died young; it was soon to be superseded by structuralism and semiotics introduced from France, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union, and by phenomenological hermeneutics from Germany and France. Structuralism did not survive the well-known ‘Structuralist Controversy’, nor did hermeneutics survive the ‘deconstructive angels’. Finally, the decons had to be politicized, historicized, and ‘Re-Marxed’. In the last ten years, the velocity of change has been so rapid that one can hardly talk about paradigm shifts.

After the New Criticism was introduced to Taiwan in the late sixties—a historical anachronism that needs no reiteration, it began to enjoy a short period of stability—thanks to Master Yen’s persistence and thanks to the critical school’s magic name ‘New’. But what was ‘new’ soon grew old, and the master-disciple relationship can be easily reversed and displaced. In the mid-seventies, I was quite on my own doing semiotics and maybe among the few beneficiaries of the Europe-based journal Poetics. With the increasing speed-up of cross-cultural communication in the world system of information, towards the end of the decade, all kinds of critical theory had flooded in.

Facing the rapid velocities of change in the wake of the ‘Modernist-Historicist’ debate enacted by Yen and Yeh in the early seventies, I cannot but synchronize the fiction of the friction among critical factions in the diagram (figure 3) borrowed from Richard Macksey (1974: xxv). This Cartesian diagram is in the first place a fictional attempt to stabilize temporality and to monologize plurality. For this reason, if for no others, it is too fragile to meet the challenge of a deconstructionist or Marxist. Furthermore, it appears quite dated for it did not anticipate so many new factions, such as feminism, the translinguistic dialogism, and systems theory. However, protected by the law of reception anachronism, which makes Taiwan synchronic with Johns Hopkins, I believe it can still give us (a simulacrum of) the general picture of the critical situation in Taiwan in the last twenty years or so. My strategy is to pick up some examples from Index to Essays in Chung-Wai Literary Monthly (1987), and force my colleagues on the Procrustean bed where, I believe, none will feel comfortable.

As can be seen from figure 3, the concern of Yeh Chia-ying and the ‘traditionalists’ (parenthesized as ‘Yeh et al.’) is primarily with literature’s referentiality and genesis (especially the expressive and cognitive dimensions), whereas Yen is more concerned with its textuality. Yen’s introductory essay in his 1975 volume, originally published in October 1972, entitled ‘Chung-kuo ku-tien shih tê tuo-i hsing’ (Plurisignation in classical Chinese poetry), serves as a good example. The analysis therein is basically a semantic one, focusing on the poem’s categorematic and syncategorematic diction (parenthesized as ‘Yen 1970’). Incompatible with his insistence on the literary text’s intrinsic value is Yen’s Arnoldian position of ‘literature as criticism of life’. Therefore, on the right hand side of figure 3, Yen is allied with the classical moralist who asserts that literature performs the social functions of prodesse, delectare, and movere.

If we focus on the autotelic category in the WORK coordinate, we shall find names like Ku (1976), Chang (1978), and Chou (1983). Under the general heading of ‘formalism,’ these represent, however, distinct approaches and suggest, as it were, a small scale ‘paradigm shift.’ While Ku, writing in line with the New Critics, draws an analogy between John Crowe Ransom’s and Weng Fang-kang’s concepts of textuality, Chang experiments with the theory and practice of structuralist narratology. The next few years witness Chou’s attempt to go beyond text-oriented formalism by exploring the relationship between speech act and narrative. Hence the
WORK coordinate gradually tilts towards the AUDIENCE, and formalism gives way to literary pragmatics.
It was about the same time that William Tay, Kin-yuen Wong and David Wang started publishing works on Neo-Marxism, phenomenology, and the new ‘historiography’ (or archeology) of Michel Foucault. These are (mis)represented on both sides of the AUTHOR coordinate. It is hard to locate the position of Foucault in the Cartesian matrix, as is the case of Derrida, for whose increasing popularity and ultimate triumph in Taiwan’s academy, tribute should be paid to Ping-hui Liao (1982, 1983).

As in the United States, the contention among critical factions in Taiwan during the period of 1970s-80s can be explained by at least three meta-critical problems identified by Richard Macksey (1974). First, the discrimination of the major critical questions, whether they are ontological, epistemological, normative, historical, or otherwise. Second, the definition of the subject of study, whether it is the author, the text, or the reader. Third, the identification of which critical discourse is being evoked, be it interpretive, appreciative, or meta-critical, etc. These three sets of problem make all the distinctions among rivaling camps, whether they are contemporaries or belong to different generations.

The three sets of questions can be integrated into a broader system-theory of literature, as exemplified by Schmidt’s LITERATURE-system, with explicit formulations about its epistemology, meta-theory, object-theory, and methodology. It is not surprising that to date no such attempt, or interest, or even awareness is visible in Taiwan’s academy. A plausible explanation is that during the last two decades reception and post-processing of Western critical theory in Taiwan has been largely confined to American sources. The availability of such sources is further conditioned by the educational background of their mediators. Therefore, when one tries to assess cross-cultural theory transmission, the law of availability should always be taken into consideration. Otherwise, an undesirable consequence in the form of mirage would emerge as follows: Even today, some beguiled ‘traditionalists’ - victims to the word ‘new’ - still believe that the New Criticism represents the whole of Western literary scholarship.

One can certainly situate the experience of Taiwan in a global context to find an irony. With the exception of a few native persuasions, such as the New Criticism, American literary studies in the last two decades have been under heavy influence of European trends. To map the whole picture of cross-cultural contacts, if possible, would not only tax the labor of a positivist, but also necessitate a different construct of inter-systemic communication model.

References

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