

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

The jury is still out on the implications 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 valuable 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

References

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- Liu, Lydia H., *Translingual Practice: Literature, national culture and translated modernity – China, 1900-1937*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (1995).

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