

The Political (Un)conscious: Rethinking Aesthetics from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Xiaohong Zhang,

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Abstract: In her article, "The Political (Un)conscious: Rethinking Aesthetics from a Cross-Cultural Perspective," Xiaohong Zhang adopts a cross-cultural perspective, examining the cultural-specific nuances of critical terms like race, class and gender, all of which have bearings on our perception and conception of aesthetics. Drawing on Emory Elliot's groundbreaking book, *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* (2002), the paper probes into the aesthetic experience whose primary effect is to de pragmatize. Along this line of thinking, the author draws attention to the aesthetic impetus of two Nobel laureates, Mo Yan and Gao Xingjian, whose rewriting of Western classics demonstrates Chinese authors' shared predilection for Western modernity in general and for modernist and postmodernist aesthetics in particular.

Xiaohong ZHANG

The Political (Un)conscious: Rethinking Aesthetics from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

A historical survey of literary research in the twentieth century is bound to reveal the variations of conceptual instruments across the globe. Critical terms and paradigms come and go. Literary research in Western Academe is marked by the change of norm systems. These changes can be explained away by new interests in new problems in new contexts. It should be noted, however, that paradigms in literary research never succeed each other in an orderly, chronological way. Different paradigms may be popular in different parts of the world. They also may coexist more or less peacefully in one intellectual community.

A long series of terms were in use and became fashionable. After some time they fell into obscurity. This was exactly what happened to the often paired-off terms like "influence" and "reception," "intrinsic and extrinsic," "tradition" and "canon formation," "generation" and "period," "form" and "style." All these terms were once more popular than they are now. This brings me to raise the following questions: which terms are the preferred vocabulary of which paradigms? Is there a rationale in the change and succession of paradigms, such as positivism, structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism? Is it possible to talk about continuity and discontinuity at the same time? Is the newer paradigm necessarily superior to the older one? Presumably, a new paradigm addresses new problems and focuses on new interests. If it is not "better", then at least it is different.

In a peculiar way, most theorists have avoided the very term of aesthetics for quite some time. Only in the 1990s aesthetics was gradually rediscovered in English and American criticism, for instance, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, by Terry Eagleton (1990), *Aesthetics and Ideology*, edited by George Levine (1994), *The Scandal of Pleasure*, by Wendy Steiner (1995), and *Emotion and Arts*, by Mett Hjort and Sue Laver (1997). In 2002, *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* came out, which signals a breakthrough in the sense that it combines an interest in aesthetics with an awareness of multicultural concerns and contexts.

In this paper, I will first look briefly into the reasons why aesthetics had once been disgraced. Then, I want to discuss a concept of aesthetics which may serve our understanding of literature in a polycentric and multicultural world. The acknowledgement that literature may be considered an art calls for an examination of its aesthetic effect. Of course, literature usually has other effects on readers well. It may, for instance, stimulate philosophical and ethical reflection or even political action, but the aesthetic experience is an effect that cannot be ignored when a reader reads a text to which by convention the designation "literature" is attributed. Finally, I will dwell on the phenomenon of rewriting, especially in the cross-cultural context. It will be argued that many rewritings have an aesthetic impetus, although the strength of political and commercial motivations should not be underestimated. To narrow the discussion of aesthetics in critical discourse down to the issue of cross-cultural rewriting has the advantage of making the problem more concrete and tangible.

Noteworthy, it would be a simplification to posit that paradigms in literary research succeed each other in an orderly, chronological, or even evolutionist way. Different paradigms may be popular in different parts of the world. They also may coexist more or less peacefully in one intellectual community. The reason why a particular paradigm (and its corresponding terminologies) is embraced is to be found in the sort of questions researchers are interested in and the kind of assumptions they take as points of departure. Any research is motivated by questions and problems, which we intend to solve. And these problems are partly dictated by the social and historical context in which we live. Specific sociopolitical contexts entail different issues of concern, such as The Iron Curtain and the Fall of the Berlin Wall in Europe; the Civil Rights Movement and "9.11" in the US; the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and the Open-up and Reform era in China. If the context differs, the focus in literary studies will be different as well. For example, over the last two decades in the United States, literary and cultural criticism has more or less centered on race, class, gender and related issues. In 1995, Gates and Appiah called these terms "the holy trinity of literary criticism" (1). They were concerned that these terms were liable to become clichés, terms without any precise meaning. Yet, the terms are still being used, although their use is largely restricted to North American contexts. In Europe, the term "race" has become almost taboo since the annihilation of six million Jews in German concentration camps. Eminent critic T. W. Adorno famously states that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, questioning the very idea of art vis-à-vis the Holocaust. For him, it is obscene to extract aesthetic pleasure from the suffering of the victims and there is a gap between the aesthetic constructions and the realities of the Holocaust. Yet, if we do not write about the Holocaust, forgetting might very well triumph over remembering. Later

on, Adorno himself suggests the need for the Holocaust to secure a place in art practice, which is a meaningful repositioning instrument to rethink race-related aesthetic issues. He claims,

I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric [...] But Enzensberger's retort also remains true, that literature must resist this verdict [...] It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it (Adorno 312).

Many scholars as well as politicians tend to avoid the term "race", which has distinctively biological connotations. If it is said that someone belongs to a particular race, that person is stigmatized and inescapably determined by assumedly racial characteristics. There are at least three reasons why we should avoid the ill-founded logic of racial determinism. First, the so-called differences between races have no solid basis in scientific research. Second, any physical or mental distinction between races is concerned only with average data, but individuals supposedly belonging to a particular race differ more from each other than the average characteristics of one race differ from those of another race. Third, in the modern world mental and cultural characteristics are more meaningful than physical constitution. Most of the mental capacity and all of the cultural knowledge of an individual have been acquired by learning and education.

What counts nowadays, is what people have learned. This makes it possible in principle to break away from the condition into which one was born. Avoiding the term "race," Henry Louis Gates rightly argued that "any human being sufficiently curious and motivated can fully possess another culture, no matter how 'alien' it may appear to be" (xv). What matters in the modern, postmodern or post-postmodern world is culture, not race. In Europe, "race" is not a problem, but beliefs are, the beliefs connected with religious, nationalist and ethnic ideologies. Something similar can be said about "class," a term with distinctive Marxist overtones, although it has been subdued or twisted in Neo-Marxist or post-Marxist criticism.

In China, the strength of the Chinese literary tradition also prevents an overemphasis on race and gender problems. Central to traditional Chinese aesthetics is the equation of literature with the vehicle of Way (*wen yi zai dao*), be it collective responsibilities in Confucianism or nature in Daoism. Literature is supposed to abide by social, political, moral mandates or nature's call in Confucian or Daoist terms. Confucianism and Daoism as the bedrock of the Chinese cultural tradition are semi-religious, semi-philosophical by nature. Confucianism attaches great importance to ethical and moral excellence, as well as socio-political commitment. The resultant literature is imbued with political aspirations, social awareness and moral pride. By taking a marginal stance, Daoism articulates strong skepticism of all effects and meanings of life (e.g. reputation, social status, power, fortune and misfortune, good and evil). The subject of Daoist literature often concerns a reclusive life-style and a let-it-be philosophy of life, articulated in a detached and escapist voice. This combined aesthetics largely dismisses gendered or racial concerns as potentially digressive and subversive. Thus, most Chinese literati are reluctant to write about "minor" issues for fear of being marginalized politically, morally or culturally.

Womanhood in Confucian terms is marked by obedience, chastity, self-sacrificing, high morality and domesticity. In classical social practice, "virtue" (*de*) is the highest propriety above other moral requirements. Its restrictive effect on women is embodied in a popular saying that "In a woman lack of talent is a virtue" (*nüzi wu cai bian shi de*). In *Women and Writing in Modern China* (1998), Wendy Larson argues, *de* expresses powerful symbolic meanings through physical discipline, while *cai* allows its practitioners access to transcendent emotional and intellectual spheres (3). In aesthetic domains, women often feature prominently as mute objects under male gaze rather than speaking and writing subjects. For instance, Tang poet Bai Juyi (772-846) portrays the nude body of Yang the Prized Consort in erotic terms throughout the long narrative poem, "Song of Lasting Pain" (*Changhen ge*). Facing nudity is a daring gesture against rigid Confucian ethics. But Bai Juyi's portrayal is readily accepted into the Chinese literary canon, not only because of its indirectness but also because of the poet's sexual identity. Male poets have the right to gaze upon the female body, which is both a fetish and a taboo in Chinese aesthetics. As fetish, the female body caters to male pleasure and fantasies. As taboo, it is indicative of forbidden areas in Chinese poetic representations. An example is the rendering of sexual intercourse as "cloud and train around Mountain Wu" (*wushan yunyu*). Within the framework of classical Chinese gender discourse, male poets are inclined to employ metaphorical expressions for aesthetic and ethical considerations, and female poets are either deprived of the right of self-representation or have to comply with male-invented conventions.

In modern China, the category of woman has always been subsumed under the larger nationalist agenda and operates within the state discourse. Women's emancipation is regarded as part of social

reform and revolution and can only be materialized through the leverage of social movements both in the Republic of China and in the People's Republic of China. Women's ultimate goal is to serve the state and the people rather than to fight for gender equality. On Chinese women's part, this results in the dominance of their "social awareness" (*shehui yishi*) over their "individual awareness" (*geren yishi*). In the post-1949 era, Chinese women constituted a huge human resource for the grand socialist project. For this reason, the Chinese Communist Party made continued efforts to mobilize women as a workforce for nation building. Mao Zedong's well-known proclamation — "Time has changed. Whatever men comrades can do, women comrades can too" (disclosed on the pages of *People's Daily* on 27 May 1965), seems to suggest that women's participation in productive labor is the key to women's emancipation, but his remarks virtually justify the exploitation of women's physical strength as well as men's for the revolutionary cause. The "revolutionary myth" of women's emancipation was widely believed and propagated. Although, in practice, Chinese women may not yet be fully emancipated, in theory, they are so believed. As a result, there seems to be less need for a theoretical focus on gender in China than in the United States. However, the main reason for the problem of gender being not strongly emphasized in Chinese theoretical discourse is that it has to compete with other, more urgent problems like nation building, social reform and revolution, modernization, and the latest socialist undertaking of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects. These old or new problems, as I argued earlier, affect the popularity of terminologies.

Under the banner of the slogan "Serve the workers, farmers and soldiers; serve politics," gendered literature is considered at odds with the dominant communist aesthetics of Socialist Realism, which combines Revolutionary Realism with Revolutionary Romanticism (van Crevel 13). Female-authored novels invariably address themselves to this mainstream mode of representation. For example, Cao Ming's novel, *Brave the Wind and the Waves* (*Chengfeng polang*), portrays a wild scene of steel-melting and steel-making in the late 1950s. Female images created by men and women alike project a de-feminizing tendency in the PRC. In *Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourse of Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* (1997), Harriet Evans observes, "a kind of androgyny, a sexual sameness, based on the de-feminization of female appearance and its approximation of male standards of dress, seemed to be the socialist ideal" (2). Fang Haichen, the female protagonist of the revolutionary model opera, *On the Dock* (*Matou shang*), is illustrative of "standard" womanhood measured against the yardstick of political correctness.

The notion of aesthetics has fallen out of favor since about 1970. In retrospect, there are several reasons contributing to its demise. First, it is induced by the mistaken belief in the intrinsic value of literary works. Although phenomenologist Roman Ingarden, New critics like Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt, or structuralists like Roman Jakobson and Levi-Strauss did not explicitly say that aesthetic qualities constituted an intrinsic property of literary works, they implied and propagated it. The term "aesthetic" appeared in conjunction with what was believed to be a stable canon of literary texts, whose aesthetic qualities expert readers were supposed to recognize right away. On one hand, the mistaken theory of intrinsic value discredited research into aesthetic values. On the other hand, it disabled the applicability of analytical methods to grasp the aesthetic elements in texts. In *Introduction to Value Theory* (1969), Nicholas Rescher argued convincingly against the idea of intrinsic value and for the concept of relational value (3). Value depends on both the qualities of an object and the norm system of the judging subject, and more precisely on the relation between the two. When interest in relational value rose, the once widely recognized idea of intrinsic aesthetic value became suspicious.

Another reason why aesthetics became unpopular was the growing (and at times exclusive) attention to the reader as an agent of value judgment, which was a reaction to the idea of intrinsic value. In his early criticism of Jakobson and Levi-Strauss, Michael Riffaterre (1966) claimed a role for the reader and his or her cultural knowledge. Riffaterre's "reader" remained an abstraction; it is a learned construction, a "super-reader" or *archilecteur* (Riffaterre, "Describing Poetics Structures" 228). Hans Robert Jauss (1970) moved closer to real readers, readers of flesh and blood, whose reactions to text we can know if they are critics and have put their judgments on paper. He paved the way for research into critical response, which gradually developed into a psychology and sociology of literature. The emphasis on varying reactions by different readers detracted, in practice, from the formal analysis of texts. That said, from a theoretical point of view, an examination of the relation between textual elements and readers' reaction looked very promising and gave rise to some experiments with textual manipulation in combination with research into readers' response. At that point, however, the issue of aesthetic readings and its relation to textual factors had hardly been examined (Zwaan 167, 169). Aesthetic response seemed too difficult to cope with.

The dominant focus on readers, their knowledge and social background, brought Stanley Fish (1980) to the provocative claim that the authority of interpretive communities is decisive and that any text can

be interpreted as a literary text. In short, Fish sees no role for textual features in the decision to read a text as literary or non-literary. Fish argues that textual features neither determine nor restrict the attribution of the designation, "literature." If the aesthetic judgment has no relation whatsoever to textual qualities and if, therefore, the causes of the aesthetic effect reside exclusively in the readers and their social community, the concept of aesthetics is reduced to a psychological disposition. Thus, the concept of aesthetics is expelled from the domain about which literary theorists have expertise, that is textual analysis and textual interpretation. No wonder that they began to avoid talking about aesthetics.

The Marxist tradition also has an uneasy relation to aesthetics. On one hand, Marx observed that in antiquity Greek art had reached "unsurpassable" heights when social and economic developments were still at a low level. He was intrigued by the fact that art of an archaic society could radiate "eternal charm" (*ewiger Reiz*) (Marx and Engels 125). These views contradicted the Marxist core postulate that the superstructure is dependent on the base, which caused great confusion among later followers of classical Marxism. Marx was very much a child of his times, and he accepted the then prevailing literary canon. His followers tried to eliminate the paradoxes of his judgments. At the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art (1942), Mao Zedong took a clear stand by saying that "each class in every class society has its own political and artistic criteria. But all classes in all class societies invariably put the political criterion first and the artistic criterion second" (89). A work of literature is primarily an ideological construction whose social effect weighs over its social effect. Its artistic quality is ideologically motivated and politically measured. The unity of form and content, which is of crucial importance in the context of Western aesthetics, is underestimated and often separated. In *Literary Doctrine in China and Soviet Influence 1956-1960* (1965), Douwe Fokkema observes, if the concepts of form and content are separated, "the form (the material of language, and the linguistic and stylistic patterns and structures) is easily looked upon as a mere instrument which may be used arbitrarily and upon which no specific demands of originality or creativity need be made" (Fokkema 5).

Mao Zedong's affinity with the Soviet aesthetics of proletarian realism resonates both in his literary criticism and creative practice. Mao prefers the forms of wall newspaper, folk songs, folk tales and reportage to creative styles and fancy neologisms. It is worth noting that Mao's aesthetics originate from the revolutionary kind of utilitarianism with an acute political consciousness, which means to serve the best interests of the broad masses, namely the workers, peasants, soldiers and the urban petty bourgeoisie. This Maoist ethics and aesthetics superimpose the notion of class struggle on human nature and that of the collective on the individual. The individual self is considered trivial, insignificant, non-essential when compared with larger and ostensibly more lofty goals, such as the emancipation of humankind and socialist construction. This kind of political education propagates self-effacement and self-abandonment, which in the name of politics, negatively affects humanity and interpersonal relationships. When the artistic criterion comes second only, as nowadays also many critics and theorists in cultural studies and postcolonialism tend to believe, it is not very rewarding to focus on it. A Marxist context does not seem favorable to aesthetic discussions.

Finally, multiculturalism has not favored the study of aesthetics. As an extrapolation of the Marxist view of class struggle, multiculturalists saw a sharp distinction between "majority" and "minority," between former colonial powers and postcolonial nations, between male and female genders, between elite and popular art. Because of its potential to bridge these political and cultural differences, the aesthetic experience, so the argument goes, should be distrusted. Frederic Jameson warns that art may seduce us to acquiesce in the late-capitalist social order and cultural logic. Or, in Wendy Steiner's summary, art may fool us into "trading away justice and our own best interests" (Steiner 155). Louis Caton recalls Jameson's idea that in the aesthetic realm the process of cultural "universalization" may lead to "the repression of the oppositional voice, and the illusion that there is only one genuine "culture" (Elliot 280). The anti-aesthetic slogans in *The Political Unconscious* are "always historicize" and "politics first" (Jameson 9, 17). Undoubtedly, Jameson's political unconscious has since transformed into a political conscious, a conscious stance which works to disavow the purportedly corrupting and seductive influence of the aesthetic. Interests in aesthetics fell victim to this coercive trend of political domination as measured by the one and only criterion of political correctness.

As enumerated above, growing support for a theory of relational value, the invention of reception aesthetics, the idea of interpretive communities, Marxist and postcolonial criticism, and multicultural views have relegated aesthetics to the margins of theoretical discourse. The authors of *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* (2002) argue from various positions that the neglect of aesthetics is unfortunately wrong. One argument against the marginalization of aesthetics is that aesthetic judgment cannot be avoided and is indispensable to cultural life. As Emory Elliot says, "aesthetic issues are always with us, and within various personal and social contexts, matters of beauty and taste function significantly in all dimensions of our lives" (14). This is a very general observation and I see little reason to disagree with.

Elliott comes closer to the classroom situation when he argues that the work of minority writers, which has become part of the school curriculum, should be subjected also to "close analysis of the writing as art" (14). At this point, he advocates the "analysis of the literature itself" (14). He implies the awkward discrepancy in terms of our eclectic approach to teaching material and methods. In the classroom setting, Shakespeare and Cao Xueqin are being taught for literary and literary historical reasons, while minority literature and some other forms of literature are selected for political reasons. Elliott is apparently against this double standard and the non-selective politicization of literature. His argument for also subjecting previously marginalized texts to the looking glass of aesthetics is motivated by his wish to transport these texts beyond their immediate socio-political contexts and to bring them on a par with traditional literature.

American literature constitutes the focal point of Elliott's theoretical project. In view of African-American writing, he acknowledges the "previously marginalized and undervalued cultural influences upon U.S. writing, such as those from Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific Rim countries" (16). In a positive, but still ethnocentric gesture, he argues in favor of training "all students of 'American' literature in the cultures and aesthetic traditions of the peoples of the world whose influence upon U.S. culture and literature is undeniable" (16). This is an ambitious program, as ambitious as Étiemble's old idea of requiring from any serious student of comparative literature to command at least one non-European language and poetics. He called for comparatists to get out of European or Eurocentric limitations to study "Sanskrit, Chinese, Tamil, Japanese, Bengali, Iranian, Arabic or Marathi literatures," the mission impossible, so to speak (Étiemble 19, 34). In agreement with Étiemble, Guillén also encouraged comparatists to move towards that direction and considered East-West studies as "the most promising tendency in comparative literature" (Guillén 87). Elliot sketches a wonderful program, aiming at "the fullest possible grasp of the aesthetic principles of the cultures" which contributed to U.S. literature, but what he means by aesthetics (which apparently can be found also in other cultures) and how it can be studied remains in the dark.

Giles Gunn phrases a preliminary condition of the study of aesthetics. He assumes that "the aesthetic can, at least under certain circumstances and conditions, be conceived as constituting, if not a realm apart, then at least a realm that is discriminate and distinctive," the realm that often has "practical dimensions with markedly ethical overtones" (Elliott 63). This sets the scene for staying what the aesthetic is or can do. By way of John Dewey and Hannah Arendt, Gunn arrives at Martha Nussbaum's idea that literary fiction stimulates certain kinds of practical moral reflection that cannot easily be evoked in any other way. Thus, aesthetics is justified by its potential ethical effect. By what exactly this ethical effect is caused is not immediately clear. Nor is it clear whether the produced ethical effect is always desirable.

In *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, Heinz Ickstadt's contribution is most persuasively in favor of taking the aesthetic aspect of reading literature seriously. Ickstadt is well aware of both American and European traditions, of Dewey's pragmatism as well as Mukarovsky's functionalism. From his point of view, any theory of aesthetics "would have to give account of a fundamental plurality of aesthetic production and reception [...] of aesthetics different in purpose, use and function at different historical moments or for different social groups" (Elliott 266). Thus, Ickstadt rejects the theory of inherent value and maintains that "the category of the aesthetic is indeed not a textual category in the first place but constituted by the act and manner of our reading." When René Wellek discussed Mukarovsky's work, he usually was overcritical, even hostile, not only for scholarly, but also for political reasons. After the communist takeover in Czechoslovakia in 1948, Mukarovsky became rector of the University of Prague and in that capacity appeared to be a most ardent supporter of the new Communist regime. Wellek, as a Czech expatriate in the U.S., used all his influence to belittle Mukarovsky's significance. Along similar lines, the excellent survey of Czech structuralism in Lubomír Doležel's *Occidental Poetics* (1990) did not get the attention it deserves.

Interestingly, when Derrida says in an interview in 1989 that "there is no text which is literary in itself" and that "literarity is not a natural essence, [not] an intrinsic property of the text," he is repeating a well-known position in European theory (Elliott 264). When Derrida focuses on the textual features calling for literary reading and literary convention, he is explicitly in line with the functionalist and semiotic approach. The strength of structuralism, functionalism, reception theory, and semiotics in European theory may explain why Derrida never attained that level of applause in continental Europe as he did in the U.S.

But what is aesthetics? If it is a mental construct indicating a subjective attitude rather than qualities of things in reality, it refers to a specific way of dealing with things, a specific mindset or action. If we wish to study it, we should examine the relation between people and things, or between people and people. One way of approaching the problem is to try to distinguish aesthetic observation from ethical

behavior, or from a religious commitment, from rational knowledge, and from concrete action. These five areas: aesthetics, ethics, religion, knowledge and action are all mental constructs based on conventional distinctions in practice. These distinctions are the varying results of long-standing cultural debates in different cultures and different localities—debates which also at present continue to draw new boundaries. The emphasis on the various domains may shift from time to time and from one situation to another. If symbolism, modernism and postmodernism were emphasizing the aesthetic function, existentialism rather put an emphasis on ethics, and in some variants, on religion. Some cultures are more contemplative, others more bent on action. Some cultures trust intuitive knowledge, others have full confidence in rational knowledge. The differences in the content of the various domains and in the relations between these domains are numerous. And yet, the distinction of the five domains of aesthetics, ethics, religion, knowledge and action is sometimes considered universally practicable, at least in modern times. When discussing aesthetic or ethical values the age-old issue of universality and particularity cannot be ignored.

About aesthetics, Emory Elliott writes that he does not want "to assert that all art works and critical standards are entirely relative," but neither does he wish to say "that they are universal and transcendental" (14). He argues that "we need only to look at representations of human beauty over the centuries and across cultures to see that notions of beauty vary depending on the time and place" (14). Elliott seems to claim paradoxically that the concept of beauty has general significance but that its precise contents cannot be known since these are blurred by its varying concrete manifestations. How does one conduct research into the manifestations of beauty or the aesthetic experience when the object of study remains that vague?

If we begin to examine the aesthetic experience as a psychological effect of the aesthetic relation between a subject and an object, we may think of the following guidelines: 1) The aesthetic experience in a subject has probably been evoked by observations of certain things (including texts) under specific circumstances; 2) Although any thing and any condition may trigger aesthetic responses, some things (texts) and some conditions are more likely to arouse such responses than other things and conditions; 3) To what extent certain things and conditions, certain texts and contexts, are favorable to an aesthetic reception is determined largely by convention, including unexpected departures from convention; 4) In order to avoid the dubious distinction between form and content, a distinction that can be useful under the conditions of a strict semiotics analysis, we may prefer to speak of the aesthetic effect of form and content. We can study the aesthetic effect of certain texts or elements of a text by examining reception documents and other traces of text processing.

The aesthetic attitude de pragmatizes the object. The aesthetic effect of a text makes readers focus not on its practical information or its conformity to the so-called reality; it makes them rather ignore factual correctness and immediate practical application and focus on a cognitive and emotive processing of general beliefs and models of behavior. This is, with some amendments, what Siegfried Schmidt has described as the "aesthetic convention" (Fokkema and Ibsch 119). Usually, there are reasons for a predominance of the aesthetic attitude; it may have been stimulated by elements in the text or the context which have been recognized as signposts indicating that an aesthetic reading is appropriate and rewarding. The "depragmatization" of a text does not exclude the cognitive processing of that text. Ignoring the question of factual correctness does not mean that a literary text can be denied of factual grounds and historical contexts altogether. Nevertheless, the aesthetic processing of a text will probably aim at a holistic view based on intuition rather analytic knowledge.

Admittedly, as Elliott has reminded us, the concept of the aesthetic must remain vague if we wish to use it in cross-cultural comparison. Each culture (each time-segment, each social sector within a culture) has different ways of processing aesthetic texts. Yet, we may push our understanding of the aesthetic experience occurring while reading a little further by considering it to be a composite of: 1) keen perception stimulated by uncommon or stylized language and / or by contextual circumstances, 2) de pragmatization; 3) intuitive holistic insight (rather than factual knowledge), which is relevant to the life-world of the reader and the completion of which yields; 4) a satisfaction which is called "bliss" or "pleasure". Only if we have a general but rather clear conception of the aesthetic experience, can we begin to look for its different manifestations in different cultures and times.

One thing must be emphasized: the general concept of the aesthetic experience which I propose contains more than just pleasure. It differs from hedonism. In psychological research the difference between aesthetics and hedonism is of crucial significance. My tentative definition of the aesthetic experience includes the element of reflection, which is excluded in hedonism. The aesthetic experience of a reader can be conceived as a dynamic process which is built up gradually and also gradually dissipates into other mindsets. Several, partly overlapping, stages can be distinguished and, without being exhaustive, described as follows: cognitive text processing, recognition and interpretation of

aesthetic signposts, de pragmatization, emotive identification with characters and general beliefs, construction of a fictional world, ethical reflection on models of behavior, remembering this fictional world, and sometimes, action while recalling what one has read. If there is a relation between aesthetics and ethics, it is a chronological rather than a logical one.

The relation between the aesthetic and the ethical effect of reading can be further explored. The aesthetic experience enables readers to look at things from a fictional distance. They read about a fictional world and interpret it without feeling threatened by it. That is the effect of de pragmatization. Nevertheless they absorb knowledge of that other world, in which both familiar and unfamiliar characters live according to well-known or less well-known rules. Readers may reflect on the behavior of these people and, as a result, their knowledge of what people may do to each other and for what reasons will increase. In this way, fictional texts which evoke an aesthetic reading open doors to other worlds, other cultures, other ethical rules. This point is not that readers can be persuaded to think favorably of the behavior of people they read about, but that they are confronted with another, often unfamiliar world and may learn from it. Their ethical knowledge will increase, and may affect their ethical attitudes, stances and behaviors in practice. Acting on the basis of newly informed ethical knowledge must be considered more appealing than acting on the basis of restricted or even petrified ethical knowledge or none at all.

I am not saying that all literary readers will become better human beings. However, literary reading may increase knowledge of worlds we know little about. I propose that we further interrogate this effect of literary-aesthetic reading. Some empirical research has been done in this field, for instance, by Hakemulder (2000), which has confirmed Nussbaum's intuition that literary reading may "transport us, while remaining ourselves, into the life of another" (Nussbaum 111).

Perhaps we do not need any justification for literary-aesthetic reading, no justification for standing back and looking at the world at a distance. Such a reorientation is at times necessary and rewarding as an end in itself. However, apart from such philosophical moments of reorientation, the aesthetic experience usually is not disconnected from other, more practical moments in our lives. The aesthetic experience, as formulated above, consisting of keen perception, de pragmatization, intuitive holistic view, and pleasure, derives mainly, but not exclusively, from studying literatures across cultural-linguistic traditions. One may argue that at times didactic elements feature prominently in classical Chinese literature, as manifested in the Chinese poetics of "literature as the vehicle of Way." This may lead to doubts about the applicability of "de pragmatization" to the literary reading of Chinese texts. But lower visibility of de pragmatization does not necessarily mean the absence of de pragmatizing inclinations and manifestations. If this can be concluded on the basis of what we know of the Chinese tradition, our concept of the aesthetic experience has served a purpose: our knowledge of the various manifestations of aesthetics has become more plausible.

Although our tentative concept of the aesthetic experience may need correction and modification in certain cases, there is no denying that the concept of the aesthetic experience plays a role in all major cultures, at least in all cultures with a script (for it is the invention of writing that has facilitated the rise of different linguistic codes and modes of interpretation). If this concept applies in different cultural contexts, it should be possible also to explain what its semantic contents are. Of course, if we go back in time far enough, the traces of the aesthetic experience will be lost. The concept of aesthetics is a product of history and particular localities. Still, there is no reason for abstaining from looking into its modern manifestations across cultural differences.

Over the last two decades publications on rewriting have grown vastly. These publications often include the field of intertextuality. In isolation, literary texts carry no significance. When they refer to social reality or express ideas, thoughts and feelings, they often do so in response to other texts. This is what the whole project of intertextuality and rewriting is all about. Moving from this minimum consensus that a text cannot exist and be interpreted as a self-sufficient whole, wide-ranging redefinitions have emerged in European and American scholarship on literature and culture: "intersemioticity," "interdiscursivity," "transtextuality," and "intercontextuality," thus adding to the terminological confusion. Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978) and Genette's *Palimpsestes* (1982) were landmarks in the (re)discovery of intertextuality as a topic of research and their books were followed by numerous other studies, such as by Borich and Pfister (1985), Steiner (1986), Worton and Still (1990), Plate (1995), Bernardelli (1997), Broich (1997), Calinescu (1997), and others. But Riffaterre and Genette were not the first to discuss rewriting from an intertextual perspective. In a more general sense, Ernest Robert Curtius (1948) laid the basis for examining the recurrent use of themes and genres in his famous and widely translated study, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*.

Intertextuality itself is dialogic by nature, which disavows the intrinsic value of texts as well as the immanent interpretation as in New Criticism. The notion of intertextuality draws attention to the vast

network of textual links, intraculturally or intertextually. It is "a crucial instrument in our understanding of how a text was made or could have been made; it correlates with an open-ended concept of discourse" (Fokkema 1). The bottom-line of intertextual scholarship is that texts do not emerge out of nothing, but inevitably build on preceding traditions. Proceeding from there, scholars of intertextuality have rendered a far more complex picture than has been formulated theoretically. How an author may invest significance in a text and how readers may attribute significance to it, constitute the key to our understanding of the mechanisms of literary production and reception. Intertextuality is by nature dynamic and multi-directional. Authors and readers function as the two axes of intertextuality (Worton and Still 2). In terms of production, intertextuality can be intended or unintended by the author, with or without specific references to other texts. In terms of reception, intertextuality may be noticed or go unnoticed by the individual recipient. The two forms of explicit and implicit intertextualities are thus generated. To my mind, explicit intertextuality is mostly intended, but may fail to catch readers' attention; unintended intertextuality can be discovered or attributed by readers. Implicit intertextuality is either intended or unintended, which, again, may or may not be noticed. In whichever case, the ambiguity rings true to the indecisive nature of authorial intention and to the unparalleled relations between authors and readers, as well as among readers themselves. Readers' linguistic and literary performance plays an important role in the intertextual operation. It is readers' discretion that finally determines whether an intertextual phenomenon is explicit or implicit. In other words, all intertextualities boil down to the less ambivalent distinction between noticed and unnoticed intertextuality.

In many cases, rewriting can be seen as a most outspoken form of intertextuality. Any poetic or narrative form can be seen as a rewriting of other literary or nonliterary utterances. This resonates with Riffaterre's formulation of intertextual manifestations that stem from the tension between texts and their intertexts (which are actually pre-texts). Each text represents the following pairs of opposites (with each of the first items corresponding to intertexts): convention and departures from it, tradition and novelty, sociolect and idiolect, the already said and its negotiation or transformation (Riffaterre, "Compulsory Reader Response" 76). Riffaterre's intertextual theory is constructed upon two theoretical assumptions. First, a text cannot be properly decoded on its own terms, without reference to other texts. Second, capable readers have sufficient knowledge about traditions, conventions and sociolect to effect a successful decoding.

In her Ph.D. dissertation "Visions and Re-visions: Female Authorship and the Act of Rewriting" (1995), Liedeke Plate argues that rewritings "always imply a return to a classic text and a continuation of its literary life" (11). The motivations for rewriting can be grounded in particular philosophical, ethical, cultural or political views, focusing, for instance, on issues of gender or ethnicity (Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, 1976; J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, 1986; Wang Anyi's *A Song of Long-Lasting Pain*, 1999), or on a postmodern reinterpretation of cannibalism and corruption (Mo Yan's *The Republic of Wine*, 1999). Without delving into the motivation for rewriting, we need to recognize the markedly aesthetic effect of rewriting situated in a particular literary tradition. An ostensive rewriting puts readers on the track of trying a literary interpretation. The device of rewriting distances the text from the other texts that are less likely to be associated with literature. It is a signpost asking for an aesthetic reading, with the result of depragmatization and an emphasis on intuitive holistic views instead of factual knowledge. Reading a rewriting may also lead to the cognitive pleasure of recognizing the formal and thematic similarities and differences from the earlier text. The ambiguity of a rewriting enhances its aesthetic reception (Genette 451). In short, rewritings call on readers to actualize the aesthetic convention. It is almost impossible to ignore the aesthetic effect of rewritings.

Since rewritings occur in all major cultures, a cross-cultural examination of their potential functions and realized effects, including research into the rewriting of earlier texts from another culture, may elucidate the varying manifestations of the aesthetic experience. However, apart from the ubiquity of rewritings, there is another reason why they are intriguing. The widespread phenomenon of rewriting seems to imply that the number of extant stylistic and narrative forms is limited. Rewriting reminds us of the restrictions of our mental and ecological universe. The device of rewriting is an iconic sign of our existential limitations. Rewriting an earlier text is, as Botho Strauss once suggested, a kind of recycling, a recycling of semantic waste (Strauss 95). Of course, we may try to comfort ourselves by positing that, although the themes and forms of literature are limited in number, their potential combinations are infinite. Yet, most writers and readers are incapable of dreaming that infinity. Perhaps we should be content with appreciating the real marvels within our closed universe.

The reassessment of tradition may occur alongside the confrontation and assimilation of other cultural traditions. I believe that it is not farfetched to assume that, in China, the reassessment of the indigenous cultural legacy and the selective appropriation of other cultural traditions receive great

critical and scholarly attention in the present cultural debate, more attention than in the US or Europe. The dynamics of a globalized cultural interaction favors a focus on the relations between texts, including their interpretations and uses, both of one's own culture and of other cultures, that is to say, intra-cultural intertextuality as well as intercultural intertextuality. Intercultural intertextuality is a significant cultural phenomenon in this age of globalization.

However, in intercultural exchanges, there is often an asymmetry. Chinese authors tend to be better informed about the West than their Western colleagues about China. References to European and American literature by Chinese authors are more well-founded than references in Western literature to Chinese texts, despite the fact that intercultural literary communication is mostly realized through the medium of translation. Contemporary Chinese authors' exposure to Western literature is governed by three mechanisms. First, the limited availability of Western literature, on the Chinese literary market and in Chinese literary education, restricts the reading horizon of Chinese writers. They largely read what is available in Chinese translation. Second, those who write hope to claim legitimacy and canonicity for their works by referring to important predecessors, particularly from the West. Third, their affinity with Western literature is motivated by curiosity about Western modernity as a desire to approximate dominant literary trends in the West.

Inevitably, part of the original connotations of the term "intertextuality" (*hu-wen-xing*) is carried over from the original concept, as phrased by Julie Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and others, to the Chinese context. Inevitably, the many references to other texts in the fiction of Chinese Nobel laureates Mo Yan and Gao Xingjian have the effect of relativising the unity of their novels. In *The Republic of Wine* (1999), Mo Yan incorporates modernist and postmodernist techniques of interior monologue, fragmentary narrative, an unreliable narrator, and multiple perspectives in his grotesque rendering of corruption, alcoholism and provincialism. Stylistically, it echoes James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Thematically, it responds to cannibalism, as denounced by Jonathan Swift in his canonical political satire "A Modest Proposal" (1729). Gao Xingjian has clear affinity with the Theatre of the Absurd in his creative practice. He is a noted translator, particularly of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco. His earlier experimental play, *Bus Stop* (1983), is widely received as a cross-cultural dialogue with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1955), in that it is all about aimless waiting and searching. The boundaries of the text become blurry: there is much emphasis on "the making of the text," the narrative technique, the ways language has been employed, and the active role of the reader in interpreting these texts which point in many, sometimes diverging directions. The emphasis on earlier texts from both the indigenous and foreign traditions challenges readers to activate their knowledge of other, sometimes alien texts and conventions. This may help readers to emancipate themselves from prescribed and limiting roles, and to adopt, if only for a brief moment, a new perspective.

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