

The Politics of Recognition and Comparative Literature: New Works by Dale and Yu, Bol, Owen, and Peterson

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### Recommended Citation

Huang, Alexander C.Y. "The Politics of Recognition and Comparative Literature: New Works by Dale and Yu, Bol, Owen, and Peterson." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 8.4 (2006): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1325>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1325)

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**CLCWeb Volume 8 Issue 4 (December 2006) Book Review Article**  
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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss4/6>>

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**Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 8.4 (2006)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol8/iss4/>>

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**Alexander C.Y. HUANG**

**The Politics of Recognition and Comparative Literature: New Works by Dale and Yu, Bol, Owen, and Peterson**

Since the days of Earl Miner, comparative literature scholars, especially those who work in non-European traditions, have lamented the Eurocentric model that has dominated the discipline since its foundation in the nineteenth century. They have advocated -- with more success in recent decades -- the virtue of globally conceived, cosmopolitan model (see, e.g., Damrosch; Saussy; Spivak; Tötösy). A much contested notion is world literature in translation, especially how close reading should be done in an age of globalization and whether -- amidst the politics of recognition -- non-Western literary texts can or should be read side by side with their Western counterparts. In this review article, I discuss a recent reader and an anthology: Corinne H. Dale, ed., *Chinese Aesthetics and Literature: A Reader* (Albany: [State University of New York Press](#), 2004) and Pauline Yu, Peter Bol, Stephen Owen, and Willard Peterson, eds., *Ways with Words: Writing About Reading Texts from Early China* (Berkeley: [University of California Press](#), 2000). These two volumes make significant contributions to both Chinese literary studies and comparative literature, not only because they expand the repertoires of primary and secondary materials (in English) that are available for course use, but more importantly because they highlight the need for contextual and close reading to be a core skill in humanities. Further, they differ from most national literature anthologies in that they aim at attracting a larger readership by engaging urgent issues in general literary studies (and specifically in the discipline of comparative literature) and the politics of recognition. Generations of scholars, especially comparatists, have wrestled with these issues (see, e.g., Aldridge; Anderer; Braginsky). Some of these issues arise from the ghettoization of the studies of non-Western literatures (hence the editors' goals to target a wider readership) and canon formation (hence the calls for a more inclusive view of humanistic and literary studies). One of the more memorable debates about the Great Books was the one concerning the Stanford core curriculum on Western civilization in the spring of 1988 (see de Bary 1-5). A more recent critique on this tendency is found in Rey Chow's powerful words: "More often than not, it is assumed that comparison occurs as a matter of course whenever we juxtapose two (or more) national languages and literatures, geographical regions, authors, or themes, and rarely do critics stop and ponder what the gestures of comparing consists in, amounts to, indeed realizes, and reinforces. These days, the term "comparative" is often used in tandem or interchangeably with words such as "diverse," "global" ... "transnational," "planetary," and the like ... yet the nebulousness of the term ... seems to persist in direct proportions to its popular usage. In a field that defines itself so consciously as plural and interdisciplinary to begin with, such nebulousness is, one suspects, unlikely to go away simply with renewed assertions of the openness of comparative literature terrain or the permeability of its borders" (72).

Yu, Bol, Owen, and Peterson's and Dale's volumes anticipate and echo this call for globally articulated positions in comparative literature studies. Given these debates, over the past decades, the defensive tone found in the introductions to these two volumes would be hardly surprising. Pauline Yu, the lead editor of *Ways with Words* is no stranger to these debates and the volume reflects her long-term commitment to bridging Asian and Western traditions in US-American scholarship and the academe. Previously, Yu outlined the benefits of a more inclusive humanities curriculum in 1990: "Any close reading of an early Chinese philosophical text ... will reveal questions that ... may stimulate students to take another look at those they have been trained to ask about and within the Western tradition. Equally illuminating ... will be the questions -- and answers -- that do not appear in the Chinese text, which may similarly move readers to rethink ideas they have always taken for granted because of the culture-bound nature of the discourse to which they have been exposed ("Comparative Literature" 364). While these benefits may not be difficult to recognize, the resistance (on the part of students and scholars of Western literatures) has remained strong. Ironically, some sinologists are also willing to endorse this attitude, readily confirming the difficulty of their own specialty and the challenges -- if not outright impossibility -- of

venturing out of the safe confines of each discipline. *Ways with Words* and *Chinese Aesthetics and Literature* may be a new beginning. *Chinese Aesthetics and Literature*, aiming at students of literature, is a collection of thematic essays by such eminent scholars as Yu, Theodore Hutters, Tu Weiming, Stephen Owen, and Leo Ou-fan Lee, among others. The diverse topics of these essays range from the "imaginative universe of Chinese literature" to theater and Chinese visions of nature. *Ways with Words* is a collection of important but difficult-to-read texts from early China. These texts have been carefully translated, annotated, and introduced under the premise that "reading is an essential art of the humanities" (1). The list of contributors to *Ways with Words* is no less impressive, including Bernhard Karlgren, David R. Knechtgers, Wai-yee Li, and Stephen West. A number of contributors overlap with those in *Chinese Aesthetics and Literature*, including Yu and Owen. While a number of well-designed anthologies of Chinese and East Asian literature have appeared during the last decade (Lau and Goldblatt; Mair; Mostow), these two unique volumes not only expand the offerings but also provide fresh new perspectives that will be referenced by students of literature in years to come.

*Chinese Aesthetics and Literature* and *Ways with Words* share similarly ambitious goals of bridging disciplines and deconstructing linguistic, cultural, and imagined boundaries in the study of literature in particular and in the humanistic enterprise in general. While these two anthologies contrast each other in their logics and structure, they both seek to diversify the humanities education in Anglophone institutions of higher learning. Corinne Dale hopes her volume would help American students and scholars "come to terms with [their] own nation's cultural diversity." She argues that in a world where "borders are increasingly permeable" it is important to "learn about Chinese culture, and thus problematiz[e] our dominant patriarchal and Eurocentric worldview" (xiv-xv). Dale, a professor of English at Belmont University, is not a specialist in Chinese literature. However, her goal to "open up the curriculum" is noble and her question important: "how could we teachers educate ourselves well enough to teach texts from these very different cultures?" (vii). Her effective introduction, useful notes on the Chinese language and pronunciation, and the "Brief Outline of Literary History" -- as results of courageous border-crossing -- testify to her talent and success. The fact that Dale took the initiative to cross these borders -- rather than speculating -- is the best form of encouragement to students aspiring to learn more about non-Western cultures or even to become comparatists themselves. While *Chinese Aesthetics and Literature* aims to "introduce nonspecialists to the philosophy and aesthetics" of Chinese literature (viii), *Ways with Words*'s aim is two-fold: to help make reading -- as an essential art in the humanities and not just in Chinese studies -- an integral part of humanistic education, and to challenge the "presumption of a monolithic China" by collating a wide range of carefully selected, translated, and annotated texts that showcase differing aspects and periods of the Chinese civilization, ranging from Buddhist texts (*Heart Sutra*) to pre-modern theories of Chinese painting (Jing Hao's "Notes on the Method for the Brush"). The primary texts selected for translation and annotation in this volume come from literature and intellectual history, two important institutionalized "disciplines" in the Chinese humanities (7). Last, but not least, one of the pioneering and important features of this anthology is its inclusion of the Chinese texts in the back of the book for easy reference. While the volume's pronounced goal to transcend borders may allow a skeptic like Spivak to sound a cautionary note that one should not teach any literary text that one cannot read in the original (see *The Secular University Today*), the inclusion of the original-language text in this volume dispels any doubt that the editors do not recognize the significance of the Chinese particulars in the face of literary universals.

*Chinese Aesthetics and Literature* has a rather different design and purpose. The critical essays -- arranged in an implicit chronological order -- contain in-depth case studies, but they are aiming at an introductory level. As such, the volume is very accessible. Readers will also appreciate the lucid accounts of such diverse subjects as creation myth and modern theater. The editor also elaborates the thematic connections between the essays in the introduction. The first essay, by Yu and Hutters, is a tour-de-force explication of *wen*, which refers to a number of interconnected ideas in China: sophistication, civilization, pattern, and refinement, among others. Yu and Hutters emphasize the organic worldview in traditional China, one that is correlational and holistic.

This unique feature of Chinese aesthetics is discussed in relation to Daoism and Buddhism -- as both religious and philosophical traditions -- in the next two essays by Roger T. Ames and Tu Weiming. They pointed out differences and surprising similarities between traditional Chinese and Anglo-European literatures. The sometimes dichotomized view notwithstanding, the comparison is helpful and in fact user-friendly to students coming from non-Asian traditions. For example, Tu argues that one of the reasons why the Chinese literary tradition values communal harmony (as opposed to individuality in the West) is that individual experience is measured and understood in relation to other temporalities and persons (contemporaries or predecessors). The volume also has a nice balance among a number of significant approaches. While the Chinese philosophical tradition was dominated by literati who were male, Wendy Larson reminds readers of her essay that *de* (moral virtue) and *cai* (literary talent) are gendered concepts, and the literati tradition was defined in opposition to its others: housewives, women writers, and others. The "modern" section of this volume provides an interesting contrast to its traditional section. Leo Ou-fan Lee walks readers of his essay through the development of modern literary forms in China under various historical exigencies (such as the unprecedented scale of East-West contact) and ideological demands (such as communist social realism). Last, but not least, drama and theater are included in the volume's exploration of Chinese aesthetics in diverse forms and genres. This is a pleasant surprise, as drama and theater have frequently been marginalized in projects of this nature. Elizabeth Wichmann-Walzak's essay, "Beijing Opera Plays and Performance," continues the thread on the holistic and synthetic view of literature. Beijing opera, not unlike traditional Chinese literature, is a synthetic communal art. Yan Haiping's analysis of theatrical modernism in post-Mao China takes the readers to the contemporary era when arts are confronted -- as in other countries -- by forces of market economy. Both Yan and Wichmann-Walzak are theater practitioners as well as scholars. Yan, a theater scholar, is also a playwright. Wichmann-Walzak is similarly known for her involvement in Beijing opera and her role in popularizing the form in the US through English-language performances she directed. The last essay by Howard Goldblatt, a prolific translator and scholar, duly reminds the readers to recognize the distance to be crossed and to be critically alert that anthologies and readers, just like foreign literature in translation, play a role in shaping a canon. Translators, in Goldblatt's view, are cultural go-betweens and filters who decide which foreign texts are attractive and appropriate for a readership that does not have access to the original texts.

Dale and Goldblatt's points bring us back to some of the urgent issues raised by *Ways with Words*. As a "scholar of classical Chinese poetry in a Western institutional context [who] has collected more than [her] share of anecdotes illustrating the reach of Eurocentrism," Yu -- President of the American Council of Learned Society and a former Dean of Humanities in the College of Letters and Science at UCLA -- and her co-editors Bol, Owen, and Peterson expressed concerns about the pervasive Eurocentrism and the continuous marginalization of non-Western cultures in the curriculum. To counter the "continuing dominance ... of Mediterranean humanistic concerns in Western academic institutions today," they believe that the "reading and discussion of particular texts from disparate cultural traditions" should be a "core experience" in a "humanistic education" (1). In her 1997 essay "The Course of the Particulars: Humanities in the University of the Twenty-first Century" Yu argued that humanities education has to be both historically and critically alert to globalization. While distances and differences have shrunk, "we must not allow them to disappear altogether, for the consequences of failing to recognize their existence, and affirm their value, are simply too dire" (<<http://www.acls.org/op40yu.htm>>). She rightly pointed out that "without a profound understanding of the particulars of context and culture, we can hardly hope to produce a responsibly internationalized curriculum" ("The Course of the Particulars" <<http://www.acls.org/op40yu.htm>>). At stake is not simply the politics of recognition (from the perspective of a small and marginalized field; see, e.g., Shih 16-30) but also what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Emmanuel Levinas have theorized as the translator's responsibility to cultural otherness. Scholars of non-Western literature and comparative literature are not unlike translators who, contrary to the exigencies of an increasingly global market economy, have to retain the "marker of anterior presence" in their teaching and research (Spivak, "Translating into English"

108). *Chinese Aesthetics and Literature* and *Ways with Words* are welcome and timely contributions that will encourage this to happen.

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Reviewer's profile: Alexander C.Y. Huang teaches comparative literature at Pennsylvania State University where he is also coordinator of the Chinese Program. His publications in German, English, and Chinese address critical theory, Shakespearean performance, as well as transnational epistemologies in modern Chinese literature and performance culture. His publications have appeared in the *Shakespeare Yearbook* and in journals such as the *Asian Theatre Journal*, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, and several articles in *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. His works have also appeared in collections such as *Lebendige Erinnerung -- Xiqu: Zeitgenössische Entwicklungen im chinesischen Musiktheater* and *Shakespeare without English*. Huang has also been involved in creating two virtual archives, *GloPAD: Global Performing Arts Database* and *Shakespeare in Asia*. E-mail: <[acyhuang@psu.edu](mailto:acyhuang@psu.edu)>.