

Chinese Encounters with Western Theories: A Metacommentary

Liu Kang

Abstract: The essay takes the Special Issue of Chinese Encounters with Western Theories of *Modern Language Quarterly* as a case study, reviewing the essays of three Chinese authors Wang Ning, Zhang Jiang, and Zhu Liyuan and commentaries by Theo D'haen, Hillis Miller and myself. The essay offers a metacommentary of the essays and commentaries with respect to issues of the academic contexts in which the dialogue in this special issue is conducted, Chinese scholars' anxiety of influence over western theories, the problem of “*Dao* (principles)” and “*Shu* (techniques),” and universalism vis-à-vis exceptionalism. This essay argues that the historical facts of modern China, especially the history of reform and opening up of the last four decades, show that China is in the world and the world is in China, and that the relationship of universalism and exceptionalism cannot be viewed as binary oppositions and mutual exclusions. Rather, it is overdetermined by multiple factors of integration and complementarity.

Keywords: The China question of western theory; metacommentary; anxiety of influence; principles and methods; universalism vis-à-vis exceptionalism

Author: **Liu Kang** is Visiting Professor at Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Shanghai 200240, China), and Professor at Duke University, USA. His research covers China Studies, Marxism, literary theory, media studies, and international relations (Email: liukang@duke.edu).

标题：中国与西方理论的对话：元批评视角

内容摘要：本文就美国《现代语文期刊》“中国遭遇西方理论”英文专辑发表感想，以王宁、张江、朱立元三位中国学者的文章和德汉、米勒及作者本人三位国际学者的回应为案例，围绕着中国与世界的学术语境、对西方理论影响的焦虑、学术的“术”与“道”的问题，即普世理念与特殊论的关系，做了元批评和思想史（知识谱系学）角度的分析。本文认为，中国现代化历史（尤其是改革开放四十年的历史）事实告诉我们，中国是世界的中国，世界是中国的中国。在观念上思考普世理念与特殊论的关系，不应视为是二元对立、非此即彼的关系，而是相辅相成和融汇的多元决定关系。

关键词：西方理论的中国问题；元批评；影响的焦虑；学术道与术；普世论

与特殊

作者简介：刘康，上海交通大学访问教授、美国杜克大学教授。研究范围包括中国研究、马克思主义、文艺理论、媒体研究和国际关系等。

The Reform and Opening-up (*gaige kaifang*) that began in 1978 ushered in an era of intellectual and cultural reflections during the 1980s through renewed translations and commentaries of western ideas. During the three decades of the PRC's self-imposed foreclosure of 1949-1978, little intellectual exchanges with the world occurred, except the Soviet Union, which served as the only source of knowledge and ideas. The 1980s Chinese encounter with western ideas and theories is comparable in scope and impact to that of the late Qing period, around the 1890s, to the May Fourth Cultural Movement of 1919. These two historical moments, spanning a century's time, have shaped modern China's political trajectory as well as its history of thoughts, and has had a decisive impact on China today, especially in ideological and cultural realms. Marxism, a 19th century German thought, is now touted as the guiding ideology for the Communist Party of China. In recent years I have initiated a series of conversations with scholars in China and around the world, on the issue of "the China Question of Western Theory," taking cultural and literary theory and aesthetics as a point of departure, to rethink the legacy of these two historical encounters and their current ramifications (Liu 2020). These conversations attempt to interrogate the ways in which modern western theories and knowledge understand and interpret the rise of China, and how these western critical frameworks present China not only as an object of study but also as a question intrinsic to western theories and knowledge themselves.

The China Question is viewed in multilinear, multivalent ways, focusing on the discursive formation of modern Chinese literary theory and criticism during the PRC period from 1949 to the present, in terms of the reception, appropriation, and transformation of western theories that lay the foundation of the discipline and institution of art and literary studies in modern China. The China Question of Western theory is both extraneous and immanent in terms of its objects and methodology. Though extraneous to China, Western theories and the questions they arouse, once appropriated and transformed in China, can turn into modes of inquiry intrinsic in Chinese intellectual thinking and academic research. This has been especially true during the last four decades of *gaige kaifang* in China, in which "translating and borrowing" and "addressing Chinese issues with Western discourses" have become the predominant modes of both intellectual inquiry and

political decision and policy making. I have argued that the widely accepted phrase of “China *and* the world” ought to be replaced by “China *of* the world,” for China is an integral, inseparable part of the world, not a self-contained entity parallel to, and independent of, the world today, as denoted by the preposition “and” in the phrase “China and the world” (Liu, “Introduction: China Question of Western Theory” 323-340). In recent years, the paradigms of Western impact/Chinese response, tradition/modernity that once dominated the western understanding of modern China have been challenged by the western scholars of Chinese studies. Now the hot-button topics are how the dynamics of complex and multi-dimensional interactions and integrations of China into the modern world have fundamentally reshaped the world today, and, consequently, how the dominant (western) modes of thinking have been impacted by the new, emergent world order in which China plays a leading role.

In literary and cultural studies these debates over the China question echo the larger controversies. As the Chinese state has become increasingly assertive of its self-confidence and global leadership role vis-à-vis the western dominance, trends toward the western theory and knowledge that prevailed over thirty plus years have shifted in academic circles. In 2014, Zhang Jiang fired the first shot in a series of polemics against “[western] imposed interpretation,” i.e. western literary theory, in academic venues in China, and then in international English-language journals through translations and other forms of dialogues (Zhang, 5-18). It must be noted that western (i.e. North American and western European) academic circles, especially in literary studies, have thus far shown little interests in what Chinese academic have done, even though large swath of scholarly works have been translated into Chinese and a great deal of American and western European scholars had traveled to China to lecture, which was jolted only by the onset of the pandemic in 2020. However, through tireless efforts of Chinese scholars such as Wang Ning, conversations with western colleagues on issues of translation, reception, and transformation of western theory in China have gained traction amidst American and western European scholars. The conversations on the China Question of Western Theory is part of that general endeavor. Marshall Brown, editor of *Modern Language Quarterly*(*MLQ*), and Wang Ning co-edited a special issue entitled “China Encounters with Western Theories” in 2018, which includes essays authored by three Chinese scholars, i.e. Wang Ning, Zhang Jiang, and Zhu Liyuan, and commentaries on these essays by three non- Chinese scholars, i.e. Hillis Miller, Theo D’Haen, and myself. This essay is my commentary on the *MLQ* special issue as a whole. It is also a self-reflexive meta-commentary, since I myself am a contributor/commentator of that issue.

In what follows, I will raise some questions. First of all, what is the principal method for such kinds of theoretical conversations? Metacommentary is probably the best approach or method. Metacommentary here refers to rethinking the China Question of Western Theory from the perspectives of intellectual history, or archeology/genealogy of knowledge in a Foucauldian sense, to interrogate the historical trajectory of the Chinese reception, alteration, revision, and transformation of western literary theory. More specifically, how shall we engage in such theoretical conversations in divergent contexts and circumstances? The essays in the *MLQ* special issue highlight the differences in terms of discursive styles, academic norms and formats, indicative of broader divergence in Chinese and non-Chinese academic practices and paradigms. Some of these differences are a matter of techniques (术 *Shu*), such as different ways of communication and expression. Some have more to do with different principles or the ways (道 *Dao*), by which we think, analyze, and critique, etc. Techniques derive from principles/ways, and metacommentary must take both *Shu* and *Dao* into account. Thirdly, what are the salient issues or tendencies in such conversations that deserve our attention? It seems that the “anxiety of influence” has permeated the modern Chinese encounters with western theories in general nearly two centuries. The anxiety has recently grown stronger, more pronounced than ever, in almost all social sectors, even though sometimes it assumes the form of hubris or bloated sense of self-confidence, the opposite of the anxiety or angst. The growing sense of anxiety and uncertainty has much to do with China’s self-perception in the world and, vice versa, the world’s perception of China today. An inquiry of the debate of universalism vis-à-vis exceptionalism as a philosophical and intellectual question may shed some light on the issue of anxiety of influence.

Metacommentary and Context of Academic Conversations

Metacommentary refers to criticism of criticism, or theoretical reflections and critique of literary theory and criticism per se. Fredric Jameson first coined up the concept in his 1971 critique of the New Criticism then dominating the U.S. literary studies (Jameson, 9-18). The New Criticism emerged in Anglo-American academia in the mid-20th century as a formalist, “intrinsic” mode of literary criticism. It shared the basic values with the then prevailing modernist literary and aesthetic trends, insisting on the intrinsic value of a work of art and focused attention on the individual work alone as an independent unit of meaning. The New Criticism was opposed to the historical studies of literature and arts that dominated Anglo-American academia for centuries, and proposed instead a meticulous method of close-reading

or textual analysis, dissecting the formal, rhetorical, linguistic features intrinsic in literary works. It should be acknowledged that the New Criticism has established since then a principal critical paradigm as well as the criteria for canonical works of literature that lay the foundation for modern and contemporary literary studies in north American and western European countries.

As a Marxist theorist, however, Jameson wants to reinstate historical studies into the New Criticism's close-reading of literary texts. In his view, political and historical meaning is no longer exterior to the textuality but inherently textualized, and subject to interpretations foregrounded on certain codes and categories of interpretations. The codes for the New Critic are decidedly formal and rhetorical, such as irony, ambiguity, allegory, symbolism, metaphor, imagery, and narrative points of views, and so on. For Jameson the codes turn out to be political and historical, as he takes pains to identify the "ideologeme," or ideological message latent in the formal features such as metaphors or allegories in literary texts. Metacommentary for Jameson is thus a toolbox of interpretation to tease out political and historical messages: "every individual interpretation must include an interpretation of its own existence, must show its own credentials and justify itself: every commentary must be at the same time a metacommentary as well" (Jameson 10). And also: "metacommentary therefore implies a model not unlike the Freudian hermeneutic [...] one based on the distinction between symptom and repressed idea, between manifest and latent content, between the disguise and the message disguised" (Jameson 15). In short, Jameson attempts to perform a symptomatic reading of both literary and theoretical texts in order to reconstruct their socio-historical contexts. Metacommentary therefore would serve as a tool of symptomatic reading of the essays in the *MLQ* special issue.

The *MLQ* special issue is in effect an exemplar case of metacommentary. In its introduction, Wang Ning and Marshall Brown note that "Chinese-Western literary and cultural interaction remains largely unidirectional, with too few opportunities for balanced exchange. Almost all the important Western theorists have had their major works translated into Chinese, whereas few Chinese theorists and comparatists have published internationally or have been introduced to or translated for English-language academic circles. The present collection is meant to expand the dialogue between Chinese and Western theorists and literary scholars" (Wang & Brown 246). The introduction then summarizes the three essays by Chinese scholars: Zhu Liyuan focuses on Hillis Miller's 2000 China lecture on the issue of "end of literature" and the ensuing controversies in Chinese academic circles, while Wang Ning's "middle focus surveys three of the most intensively received theorists

over the past sixty years, showcasing their impact so as to identify the gaps and distortions in it” (Wang & Brown 246). The sentence on Zhang Jiang can be read as a mini-exercise of symptomatic reading: “Zhang Jiang, as a central figure in China’s intellectual life in the past few years, represents in his broad view fundamental drives simultaneously toward closer relationship and greater autonomy” (Wang & Brown 246). It underscores both the position that Zhang Jiang holds in China’s academic circles and the contradictory movements of “closer relationship and greater autonomy” that Zhang’s essay “represents.” For a *MLQ*’s intended English reader, the highlight of the central positionality and representational potency of the author will certainly escape no one’s attention, along with the “broad view of fundamental drives” that informs, and is represented by, Zhang’s essay rather than as an individual view of the author himself.

The three commentaries by non-Chinese authors, on the other hand, can be read symptomatically, too. The introduction, though co-signed by Wang and Brown, is most likely composed by Brown, indicating his editorial views of the journal as well as the special issue, since Brown, like the other non-Chinese respondents, has long been interested in scholarly exchanges with Chinese colleagues and is keen on the issues at stake. In a self-reflexive and self-critical mode, the introduction states that “we always argue, and should, yet always, and properly, we do it with the nagging awareness that we are equally partial. By debating, we come to understand what our respondents draw out, the unplumbed premises and biases in their thinking and knowledge, and ultimately, we hope, in ours” (Wang & Brown 247). Here I refer to the “three respondents” in a rather awkward manner as “non-Chinese authors,” since as one of the three respondents I must differentiate myself from both three colleagues in China and other “westerners,” namely Brown, Miller, and D’Haen. The introduction describes the special issue as “exchange of views between three of China’s most influential scholars of literary theory and three leading Western comparatists with broad experience in China. (Liu Kang is Chinese-born and has held a prominent post at Shanghai Jiao Tong University but has been US-based since arriving in Wisconsin as a graduate student in 1982)” (Wang & Brown 246). The immediate parenthesis is probably intended to preempt possible suspicion over my identity as a “Western comparatist,” by adding the name tag “China-born” and “U.S.-based.” Even though racial and ethnic identities are rarely discussed in Chinese academic circles, in the current circumstances of identity politics and postcolonialism, the issue is not really irrelevant. My self-identity here as a “non-Chinese” refers only to my intellectual background and academic affiliation, but not to my identity as an ethnic Chinese or a Chinese-American immigrant. Regardless,

I am aware that it is a truly awful way of naming and identifying oneself, let alone lumping with different groups of individuals. It deserves symptomatic reading, too.

Translation is another major question with regard to such an “exchange of views.” Brown and I, along with other English authors, had extensive discussions via email concerning the translation and writing of the essays. Marshall Brown is known for being a punctilious stylist, and, as the editor of a major English journal of literary studies, he is also famous for his uncompromising fastidiousness in writing and editing. To quote Brown’s own observations: “Academic styles vary nationally, of course. Translating Chinese language and style into American language and style is a challenge. The translators in China did yeoman work, and then Zach [*MLQ*’s copy-editor] and I have put a lot more into the effort of crafting formulations that will be idiomatic for domestic as well as international readers. This work has to go in stages” (Brown 2017). The “yeoman work” that Brown describes the Chinese translator’s job is a high accolade, especially in view of the predominant mode of academic production with massive assembly line (particularly in China) that sharply contrasts with the image of the medieval yeoman’s labor. But Brown is not shy in expressing his feelings about the limelight that the Chinese academics seem to have enjoyed: “I think that the essays already give a very interesting representation of kinds of discussion that takes place among leading academics in the world’s largest country, which we--I, at any rate--can only look on with envy” (Brown 2017) .

The commentaries by D’Haen and Miller do not necessarily display similar feelings of “envy” for Chinese academic activities, but explore unabashedly differences in rules and norms of scholarship in three Chinese essays. As the editor of the prestigious *European Review*, D’Haen is quite at ease with those differences in academic practice of western Europe, North America, and, to some extent, China. His commentary “With Chinese Characteristics” begins with a quote from the China travelogue by American journalist Peter Hessler, “that everything foreign, be it Shakespeare, Marxism, or capitalism, assumes ‘Chinese characteristics’ when imported into China” (D’Haen 329). And then: “The three essays that form the core of this issue of *MLQ*, by Wang Ning, Zhang Jiang, and Zhu Liyuan, address how Western theories of literature, on their reception in China, assume such Chinese characteristics. Zhang even uses the same term to describe the kind of criticism he calls for in his essay, ‘On Imposed Interpretation and Chinese Construction of Literary Theory’”(D’Haen 330). D’Haen’s somewhat facetious overtone on “Chinese characteristics” from Shakespeare, Marx, to capitalism, however, shifts abruptly to an observation with high seriousness, that in Wang’s and Zhang’s essays “we note an ever-increasing confidence in China’s strengths, in its peculiarly

‘Chinese’ characteristics, [...] us(e)ing their reflections as springboards toward a Chinese literary theory. Their purpose is clearest, and takes its most general formulation, with Zhang, who seems to predicate that what is needed, and is at hand, is a purely Chinese literary theory, bypassing the necessity of outfitting Western theories with Chinese characteristics” (D’Haen 311).

D’Haen, however, notes the nuanced difference between Wang Ning and Zhang Jiang. In D’Haen’s view, Wang is “largely descriptive,” and emphasizes the “all-important” role of dialogue, aiming at “a cosmopolitan literary theory of common aesthetic principles and universal standards” (D’Haen 309). By contrast, “Zhang takes umbrage both at the more recent variations of Western theory... and at world literature” (D’Haen 314). The archaic word “umbrage” in modern English simply means offense, resentment, or annoyance. Avoiding direct response to Zhang’s unveiled hostility, D’Haen cites profusely Jameson, Gadamer, and so on, to address the specific issue of literary texts and interpretation of texts. By so doing, D’Haen adroitly reconciles Zhang’s pique towards western theory with formalism and New Criticism, which happens to concern themselves primarily with the “text” itself, thus allowing D’Haen to link this intrinsic, textual priority of a New Critic with Zhang’s “objective existence” of a text. But D’Haen does not dwell on the concepts and theories of formalism and New Criticism. Instead, he spends a considerable amount of space detailing Qian Zhongshu’s scattered literary treatises in an effort to sketch out an indigenous “Chinese literary theory,” in deference to the “Chinese characteristics.” Moreover, his commentary ends with a quote from George Brandes, a 19th century Danish scholar preeminent among Chinese scholars of literature in early decades of the 20th century, reaffirming the future of the “Chinese characteristics”: “The world literature of the future will become all the more captivating the more the mark of the national appears in it and the more heterogeneous it becomes, as long as it retains a universally human aspect as art and science” (D’Haen 321). Such a *mise on abyme* is elaborate, and laborious, even though it may incidentally obfuscate, rather than compliment, the strive for pure Chinese theory. For D’Haen may not know the controversy around the famous motto often attributed to Lu Xun, the modern Chinese literary giant, that “the more national, the more global.” It sounds just like what Brandes said as quoted by D’Haen. But some Chinese literary historians find the attribution of the saying to Lu Xun simply false, and many question its wisdom, too (Yuan 49-52). Nevertheless, D’Haen delivers his well-wish.

Miller, on the other hand, is forthright, earnest, sometimes even blunt, when dealing with specific issues raised by the Chinese essays. Hillis Miller enjoys a

high reputation among today's Chinese literary scholars, almost equivalent to that of George Brandes in earlier years. And as a person, the late Miller was amicable and graceful, and quite diplomatic when greeting the three Chinese colleagues in his commentary. He compliments the illustrious biographies of the three Chinese scholars, and recounts his frequent lecture tours in China over the years, showing his genuine affection for China. Then he is raising a series of questions: "What, exactly, a uniquely Chinese form of literary theory would be like is also not specified beyond saying that it would be distinctively "Chinese." Does that mean Marxist, or Confucian, or Chinese Zen, or what?" (Miller 342) And "China has a several-thousand-year-old tradition of literary study and literary theory. It should not be all that difficult for them to do without 'Western values' and to return to their roots in those old traditions. Reconciling those with the distinctively Chinese Marxism might be a problem, however" (Miller 342). Pointedly, Miller is questioning the viability of a pure Chinese theory without western values in modern times, citing "the distinctively Chinese Marxism" that inextricably integrates Marxism that derives from "western values" with China's culture and society. He brings out this question again when commenting on Zhang's essay: "Zhang says nothing about the difficulties of reconciling that tradition with China's official commitment now to Marxism in all areas of thought and action. He does not mention a single work of traditional Chinese literary theory. Nor does he mention a single work of Chinese literature. Examples would have been helpful, even in a relatively short essay" (Miller 345).

Apart from his query on the position of Marxism in the purported "pure Chinese theory," Miller emphatically calls attention to the academic norms of extensive reference and analysis of concrete, detailed evidence. His criticism of Zhang's over-generalization seems mild and oblique ("examples would have been helpful"), and yet, by contrast, he lavishly praises Zhu's essay for the latter's exemplar scholarship: "Zhu's essay, moreover, is an exemplary demonstration of what a circumstantial account of Western theory's influence in China should be like. He not only gives an accurate reading of the example of Western theory he chooses, as well as of later works like my *On Literature*. He also presents specific details about the various essays published in China that participated pro and con in the "end of literature" debate there" (Miller 346). Miller spends more than two-thirds of his commentary engaging in detailed discussions with Zhu over issues ranging from Derrida's *Post Card* to hermeneutics vis-à-vis poetics. Zhu later wrote a Chinese essay to further the conversation on these questions, and the essay was rewritten and translated into English and published ((Zhu 2020A; 2020B). Miller indeed

had a chance to read Zhu's response to his early commentary, before his death in 2021.¹ The exchanges between Hillis Miller and Zhu Liyuan are truly exemplary, a good model for the conversation between Chinese scholars and their international interlocutors. By contrast, Miller spends less than one page on Zhang, primarily charging the latter for lack of concrete evidence and analysis: "Zhang's essay remains almost completely at the level of condemnatory generalization" (Miller 345).

In the essays of the special issue one finds a common passion for, and dedication to scholarly issues of literary studies and academic norms, with a great deal of attention to concrete evidence and meticulous, theoretically well-informed analyses and argumentations. This is what I call the *Shu*, the techniques, or more precisely the norms, rules and protocols of scholarship. *Shu* (techniques) derive from *Dao* (principles/ways). Scholarly exchanges can take place in the special issue of *MLQ* and other international venues because the authors by and large agree on and adhere to the norms of technique as well as the principles of scholarly and intellectual inquiry. First, arguments or viewpoints in the humanities and hypothesis in social sciences and natural sciences are the organizing principles for scholarly inquiry. Second, the arguments or hypothesis must be based on rigorous research that includes exhaustive review of the existing literature on the subject, as well as meticulous analysis of evidence. Last but not the least, concrete, detailed evidence constitutes the necessary and sufficient condition for academic research. In natural sciences and social sciences evidence means empirical and logical evidence from either induction or deduction; in the humanities it is the concrete text, verbal or non-verbal, subject to interpretation. However, it is sometimes hard to rigorously adhere to these norms, as shown in the essays of the *MLQ* special issue. While acknowledging that differences do occur in academic practice and norms, for instances between China and Euro-America, a metacommentary ought to probe into the underlying assumptions and principles, i.e. *Dao*, in terms of universalism vis-à-vis exceptionalism.

Universalism vis-à-vis Exceptionalism

My commentary in the *MLQ* special issue first explore the question of "anxiety of influence," commenting on the three essays by Chinese colleagues. In the second part I take Jameson and Chinese Jamesonism as a case in point to illustrate the Chinese anxiety of influence with Western theory and the battle between (Western)

1 I forwarded Zhu Liyuan's CLCWeb essay to Miller on October 30, 2020, and Miller replied to my email on November 2, 2020: "Zhu's paper received." Miller died on February 7, 2021.

universalism and Chinese exceptionalism. I argue that Chinese Jamesonism shows how an eclectic American neo-Marxist academic discourse has been reinvented in China on selected themes of postmodernism and Third World “national allegory.” However, as a “shadowy but central presence” in Jameson and other Western left theories, Maoism is nearly absent from China’s appropriation of Western theories. At the beginning of this essay, I mention that the main problematic, or the cluster of related theoretical issues, that informs my *MLQ* commentary, is “the China Question of Western Theory” (Liu, “A (Meta) commentary on Western Literary Theories in China: The Case of Jameson and Chinese Jamesonism” 323). It can be viewed as the larger context for the *MLQ* special issue and the issues of anxiety of influence and universalism/exceptionalism that I detect from the essays.

From the end of the 1990s to the present, neo-Marxist critical theory and a garden-variety of “post-isms”—poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism—have been translated, borrowed, and appropriated in China en masse and become dominant critical discourse in Chinese academia. These more recent years contrast sharply with the decade of the 1980s, or the so-called Chinese Cultural Reflection Movement. Chinese intellectuals then passionately embraced Western ideas from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, translating works of Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Friedrich Hayek, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jean-Paul Sartre, Susan Sontag, the New Critics, and so forth.

A few salient features of the historical context for the Chinese reception of Western theories should be noted. First, the brief yet historic period of the 1980s Chinese cultural reflection movement unleashed a heteroglossia of ideas, to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept. Massive modern Euro-American ideas, both liberal and conservative, opened up new ways of thinking about Chinese modernity, which challenged the powerful leftist tradition that has legitimated the Communist Party of China (CPC) rule. Second, the Marxist and leftist orthodoxy in China, though largely scorned and rejected by Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s, provided fertile ground for the reception of neo-Marxist and leftist Western theories in the new millennium. Third, a more assertive and increasingly nationalist China, especially during the recent years, called forth renewed efforts for Chinese exceptionalism vis-à-vis Western universalism. Since Western literary theories, be they leftist, liberal, or conservative, are lumped together under the rubric of Western ideas, they have become the targets of (CPC)-sanctioned campaigns against universalism. However, these assaults on universalism cause great anxiety and consternation, especially among those who have dedicated themselves to the translation, dissemination, and appropriation of Western theories which they must now denigrate, if not entirely

reject.

In the essays by Chinese authors I sense the anxiety of influence permeating almost every page. The anxiety arises primarily from the issues of Western impact/Chinese response, tradition/modernity, even though such dichotomous paradigms that had dominated China Studies in the U.S. and western Europe have been under assault for decades by Euro-American academics themselves. In my *MLQ* commentary I acknowledge my own share of such an anxiety. How should China act (or react) when encountering the West that, for the most part, is still perceived by the Chinese as a globally dominant power? This question haunts the collective imaginary of the Chinese, even though the myth of the West as a totality is mostly rejected by the so-called “Westerners” themselves, and the rising nationalist sentiment stokes a hubris of China’s imminent overtaking of the West. Setting aside the emotional aspect of anxiety, how should China position itself rationally, and realistically, in a rapidly changing, and extremely volatile world of today? As a Chinese-American scholar living in between the walls, barriers, and barricades, imagined or real, I feel most intensely the pressures from both sides, in terms of technical norms and protocols (*Shu*) and conceptual (ideological) assumptions (*Dao*).

My *MLQ* essay focuses primarily on the anxiety of influence that Chinese scholars feel when encountering western literary theory. I explore the absence of Maoism in Chinese appropriation of Jameson’s theory to showcase the dilemma of the Chinese academics when dealing with an ostensibly western, i.e. Jameson’s theory that actually draws centrally on Mao Zedong’s thought, though in reinvented configurations known as (western) Maoism. It’s an immensely complex conceptual trajectory, or “traveling theory.” The narrative must begin with Mao Zedong’s historic endeavor of “making Marxism Chinese” during the formative years of his ideas in the 1940s. Consequently a Chinese Marxism emerged, and canonized as Mao Zedong Thought. The second phase occurred during Mao’s reign (1949-1976), when Mao Zedong Thought served as the guiding ideology and policies of the Communist Party of China. The third episode, the moment when Mao’s Chinese appropriation or Sinicization of Marxism became global, occurred during (and coincided with) this second phase, as western European leftist intellectuals (primarily French) and Third World leftist guerilla leaders congregated on their newly discovered revolutionary gospel from the East, namely Mao’s writings, disseminated through massive global propaganda campaigns (Zhang & Yan 54-63). These radical intellectuals or revolutionary rebels invented various versions of Maoism, during the apex of the global “cultural revolutions” of the 1960s, in which the Chinese Cultural Revolution served as the indisputable beacon for the global revolutionaries. The

last, and the present episode is marked by China's re-appropriation of the western Marxist and leftist theories, where Maoism occupies a singular and central position. This fourth episode unfurled in the 1990s, and the drama is still going on now, being watched, and commented by the *MLQ* special issues, and through many scholarly venues around the world today.

The dilemma and anxiety of the Chinese academics with regard to the ongoing, complex, four-episode drama of theoretical journey of western Marxism and Maoism needs to be further explored. In the present context, I'd like to reiterate a point I have made in numerous occasions, a point nevertheless is quite obvious and straightforward. Simply put, the journeys of Chinese appropriation of Marxism, western Marxist theory's appropriation of Maoism, and then Chinese appropriation of western Marxist theory reaffirm over and again the inseparability of the ideas (and of course social practices of all aspects) of Chinese and the world. Marxism as a universalist idea can be appropriated locally as in the case of Chinese Marxism, from Mao Zedong Thought to the newer versions such as Deng Xiaoping Theory and Xi Jinping Thought, and, likewise, Chinese Marxism or Maoism can be appropriated by western Marxists, and then re-appropriated back to China. Unquestionably, Marxism is a universalism through and through. It aspires to a universalist ideal of human liberation and equality. In the meantime, Marxism has spawned numerous local, indigenous versions and variations, including Chinese Marxism, western Marxism, and so on and so forth. One can certainly argue that Chinese Marxism is not an ideology of exceptionalism, but a version of Marxist universalism. It may prove that the relationship of universalism and exceptionalism should not, and cannot be viewed as binary oppositions and mutual exclusions. Rather, it is overdetermined by multiple factors of integration and complementarity.

But why is there still so much anxiety? The concept of anxiety of influence is coined by Harold Bloom, whose ambivalence towards the "old school" norms of New Criticism and newer school of French theory turned out to be his trademark, compared especially with his more French-leaning, deconstructionist Yale colleagues such as Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and Hillis Miller. Anxiety of influence is Bloom's Freudian diagnosis of the unconscious, a struggle in which the young artist rebels against preceding traditions, seeking that burst of originality that distinguishes greatness (Bloom). Anxiety is an emotional, or affective response rather than a cool-headed, rational calculation. But in today's era of post-truth, what matters is not so much "objective facts" as "appeals to emotion and personal believe," as defined by Oxford Dictionary as the Word of the Year 2016 and onward (Oxford). The post-truth era is the perfect incubator of nationalist-populist

sentiments, emotions, and attitudes, sweeping across the whole world now. It is an era where ideology, rather than reason and science, reigns supreme. Ideology here refers to the emotional, imaginary and affective (aesthetic) ways of viewing and thinking about the world.¹ Nationalist-populist ideologies often ally themselves with various kinds of essentialism and exceptionalism, and attack universalism as the archenemy. In the North America and western Europe, the cultural war against universalism is waged in the name of promoting cultural diversity against Eurocentrism, but such a whole-sale rejection of universal human values risks embracing exceptionalist claims to racial, ethnic, and cultural exclusion, polarizing and tribalizing different peoples and nations. This is exactly what happens across the world today. Under such circumstances China is certainly not immune to the global wave of nationalism-populism. It is thus imperative to remind ourselves of the necessity to ceaselessly combat various kinds of essentialist, and exceptionalist claims that ultimately undermine the endeavors for building a “community of shared future for mankind” or 构建人类命运共同体 in Chinese.²

Conclusion

My commentary on the MLQ special issue attempts to identify the logic underlying the questions of different academic contexts, techniques (*Shu*) and principles (*Dao*) for scholarship raised in the essays. The strong anxiety evinced especially in the essays by Chinese authors is symptomatic of the dichotomous mode of universalism vis-à-vis exceptionalism, which can be better understood in the light of the global resurgence of nationalism-populism. However, the dichotomous mode of thinking on universalism and exceptionalism is not only conceptually misleading, but also historically false. As history has amply demonstrated, what defines China’s modernity is precisely China’s integration into the world. A commonwealth of shared values or universal values is the foundation of the commonwealth of humanity, or “community of shared future for mankind.” In the domains of literary theory and research, such shared values should guide us in our intellectual inquiry.

1 Louis Althusser defines ideology as “a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” In Louis Althusser, “Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’État (Notes pour une recherche)”. Positions (1964-1975), Paris : Les Éditions sociales (1976): 67-125.

2 Xi Jinping, General Secretary of Communist Party of China, first mentioned the concept of “community of shared future for mankind” or 构建人类命运共同体 in his 2013 speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, and since then it became a guideline for the CPC. See China Focus, “The Idea of a Community with a Shared Future,” China Daily, January 28, 2021. Available at: http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/2018/commentaries/202101/t20210128_800234170.html.

Works Cited

- Boom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
- Brown, Marshall. The Email Exchange with Wang Ning, Liu Kang, J. Hillis Miller and Theo D'haen, September 16, 2017.
- D'haen, Theo. "With Chinese Characteristics." *Modern Language Quarterly* 79 (2018): 309-322.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Metacommentary." *PMLA* 86 (1971): 9-18.
- Liu Kang. "A (Meta) commentary on Western Literary Theories in China: The Case of Jameson and Chinese Jamesonism." *Modern Language Quarterly* 79 (2018): 323-340.
- . "Introduction: China Question of Western Theory." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5 (2020). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3819>.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "Western Literary Theory in China." *Modern Language Quarterly* 79 (2018): 341-353.
- Wang Ning and Brown Marshall. "Introduction." *Modern Language Quarterly* 79 (2018): 245-247.
- Word of the Year 2016. Oxford Languages. Available at: <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.
- 袁良骏: "地方色彩·民族性·世界性", 《八方风雨》。福州: 福建教育出版社, 2000年。
- [Yuan Liangjun. "Local Color, National Character, Global Character." *Winds from All Sides*. Fuzhou: Fujian Education Press, 2000.]
- 张放、严丹: "毛泽东著述多语种版本的海外传播及利用", 《图书馆杂志》40 (2021): 54-63。
- [Zhang Fang and Yan Dan. "The International Communication and Utilizations of Multilingual Versions of Mao's Literature." *Library Journal* 40 (2021): 54-63.]
- 张江: "强制阐释论", 《文学评论》6 (2014): 5-18。
- [Zhang Jiang. "On Imposed Interpretation." *Literature Review* 6 (2014): 5-18.]
- Zhu Liyuan. "Print Culture, Digital Culture, Poetics and Hermeneutics: Discussion with J. Hillis Miller." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22.5 (2020B). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3823>.
- 朱立元: "印刷文化、数字文化、诗学和解释学——与希利斯·米勒讨论", 《武汉大学学报: 哲学社会科学版》5 (2020): 60-69。
- [Zhu Liyuan. "Print Culture, Digital Culture, Poetics and Hermeneutics: Discussion with J. Hillis Miller." *Journal of Wuhan University* 5 (2020): 60-69.]