

A Multi-Dimensional Model of Intercultural Hermeneutics between China and the West

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Abstract

In his new book *Rethinking the Relationship between China and the West through a Focus on Literature and Aesthetics*, Qingben Li breaks through the dualism of “China/the west” in the field of literature and aesthetics, and adopts a multi-dimensional model of intercultural research to reinterpret literary and aesthetic relationship between “the West/China”, “modernity/traditionalism”. Furthermore, he also proposes a new critical approach – based on “a circle model of intercultural research focusing on literary adaptations”(Li, 2018:27), attempting to re-examine the relationship between Chinese and Western literature and taking “Western learning introduced into China” and “exporting Chinese culture to the world” as an overall process.

Keywords: Qingben Li, intercultural hermeneutics, multi-dimensional model, aesthetics, China.

1. Introduction

Intercultural hermeneutics is a study which takes intercultural interpretation as the research object, represents a new trend of the development of hermeneutics. Although intercultural hermeneutics is an emerging discipline, literary critics have applied it since ancient times without much conscious articulation, which involves abandoning the “pre-understanding” of one’s own culture, and the willingness to be in other’s shoes. Consequently, there is a conscious effort to interpret one’s own culture in a way/language that the other can understand. With this in mind, however, it can be argued that the dualism of “China/the West” in literature and aesthetics may hinder intercultural hermeneutics in some circumstances, leading to the identity crisis of both Chinese traditional culture and its modernity. Professor Qingben Li’s book *Rethinking the Relationship between China and the West through a Focus on Literature and Aesthetics* breaks through

the dualism of "China/the West" in the field of literature and aesthetics, and adopts a multi-dimensional model of intercultural research to reinterpret literary and aesthetic relationship between "the West/China", "modernity/traditionalism". It is as well a constructive attempt to seek for the possibility and effective way of intercultural understanding and dialogue in the context of globalization.

What are the disadvantages of stereotyped dualism of "China/the west" in cultural and literary studies? Answering this question, Professor Qingben Li believes that in this dualistic model, China and the West are regarded as two distinct entities. They were originally used as a concept of space, but have obtained the meaning of time when China and the West are connected with the model of "tradition and modernity", that is, "China" equals "tradition", and "the West" equals "Modernity" (Li, 2018:XIII). A spatial dimension and temporal dimension are therefore superimposed on the same plane. The radical will take China (tradition) as bad or inferior and the West (modernity) as good or superior, while the conservative have the opposite view. Actually, frequent debates like "Chinese culture as basis, Western culture for use" (中体西用) vs. "Western culture as basis, Chinese culture for use" (西体中用), "complete Westernization" (全盘西化) vs. "returning to tradition" (回归传统), "clashes of Chinese and Western culture" (中西冲突) vs. "integration of China and the west"(中西融合), "introducing Western culture into China" (西学东渐) vs."introducing Chinese culture to the Western world" (中学西渐) all derive from this stereotyped dualistic model, though they have already lasted for over a hundred years. Under the background of globalization, such model is not in line with the facts, and is not conducive to the mutual understanding between Chinese and foreign civilizations. How to break this misleading model? Professor Li suggests we should separate the spatial dimension from the temporal dimension and let the words "China" and "the west" recover their original connotation of spatial dimensions so that we could rethink the equal relationship between China and the west, and explore the possibilities and pathways of intercultural understanding. Therefore, to support his argument Li develops his book into two dimensions: "space" and "time".

2. The Spatial Dimension of Cross-Cultural Research

In the spatial dimension, Professor Li first explores the dialogue between Chinese culture and Western culture and the building of Chinese cultural identity in the context of globalization. He emphasizes that the trend of globalization does not necessarily lead to the weakening of national cultural features. In some cases, globalization can promote the construction of national culture. To strengthen the building of ethnic identity via globalization must avoid two potential pitfalls, namely, cultural conservatism that

overemphasizes oneself and Western centralism that overemphasizes the other. From the perspective of cultural dialogue, the author argues that the trend of Chinese contemporary culture is based on the collision and integration of eastern and Western cultures. This evolution must have started from Chinese traditional culture and adapt itself to realistic needs of Chinese culture to some extent. And whether it is the depreciation of the east and its traditions, or the rejection of the west and modernity, there is always a historical narrative of Western or oriental centralism, and this narrative discourse is extremely harmful to the development of Chinese culture. Therefore, in the building of Chinese contemporary culture, the inheritance of tradition does not mean being confined by tradition. We should actively engage in dialogue with an open mind (Li 2014, 113-122).

In terms of the spatial dimension, Professor Qingben Li also ingeniously proposes a new critic approach – “a circle model of intercultural research focusing on literary adaptations” (2018, 27) which attempts to re-examine the relationship between Chinese and Western literature and takes “Western learning introduced into China” and “exporting Chinese culture to the world”. Specifically, this approach aims at outlining a route map of the round journey of literary texts or theories from ancient Chinese culture to Western culture, and then back to modern Chinese culture. Its goal is to explain the fact that China has its unique vision in accepting Western theories. That is, introduce those Western theories which have close ties to Chinese culture and how they are easier to be accepted if compared to the more exotic ones. As a result, modern Chinese culture and thinking can be argued to be more open. Indeed, Professor Li thinks that in a so-called circular journey, the occurrence of misappropriation, transplantation, transfer and transformation in every aspect are normal phenomena. In an effort to situate China in the global panorama, the circle model of intercultural research puts forward and re-examines the relationships between Chinese and Western cultures. To support his idea, Li makes a case study with the example of *The Orphan of Zhao* by Ji Junxiang (Li and Guo 2012, 45-60). The journey of this drama, from its original form to its Western and Eastern (mis)adaptations and critical interpretations, shows the complexity of intercultural exchanges which are never merely one-way and which include temporal mappings, in this case, for instance, from ancient Chinese culture to Western culture, and then back to modern Chinese culture .

In addition to this circle model, Professor Li discusses the way how to make Chinese literature a world literature as well. Li believes that world literature is national literature that can be read and understood by the readers of other cultures because it has features that transcend the specificity of a given nation. To these means, there are at least two ways in which national literature can become international: translation and intercultural interpretation (Li and Guo 2013). Translation is not only approached as the

conversion of language, but also involves selection and cultural variations. Translation is therefore a special form of intercultural interpretation. Moreover, in the context of modern Chinese literary realm, intercultural interpretation often takes the form of “Western theories applied to interpret Chinese texts” in order to facilitate their understanding by Western audiences and assist in the process of internationalization of Chinese literature. The book also takes the Stephen Owen’s study of Chinese literature as a case, to show that intercultural interpretation will help Chinese literature to integrate into world literature. Li’s conclusion is that Owen’s Chinese literary research borrows from the intercultural interpretation mode rather than from a “Close Reading” of what he calls “New Criticism”. Instead of applying a particular Western theory and method, this interpretation conducts deep and detailed explanations of Chinese literature on the basis of its own cultural perspective and thinking habits. For that reason, it’s a mode of focusing both on life experience and rational thinking. This mode cannot only enrich more sensitive and specific contents on rational analysis but also obtains a fully developed space for sensitive understanding. As a result, the intercultural interpretation mode adopted by Owen can be argued to be consistent with the new tendency in American Sinology development. It will make Chinese literature to attempt to create a universal value able to surpass the boundaries of nations and countries and one that could be easily and widely accepted and comprehended by a greater range of Western readers. Obviously, this pattern will be beneficial to the spread of Chinese literature to a wider audience (Li 2018,67).

In the perspective of spatial dimension, through the analyzes one of the most well-known Chinese poems, “Dwelling in Mountain and Autumn Twilight” (山居秋暝), it can be claimed that Li sets up a intercultural passage between the concept of Zen and traditional Chinese thoughts and aesthetics. It does so by using the new Western aesthetics theory developed by Shusterman and stressing their common point of non-duality, which contributes to the possibility of intercultural understanding and interpretation. Li argues that non-duality refers not only to the transcendence between dichotomies such as silence and noise, stillness and movement, outside and inside, subject and object, body and mind, human being and nature being, as illuminated in Wang Wei’s poem, but it also highlights the possibility to transcendence between different cultures. In this sense, translation can be approached as a potential tool to communicate between different cultures effectively. However, if the connotation lies beyond the language of text, or beyond what a translation can express, further fully developed explanations will be needed (Li 2013, 37-46).

In addition, the issue of appreciation of poems can be associated with the appreciation of nature. Thus, in this book, Li reviews three models of appreciation of nature: the artistic model, the environmental model and the

ecological model. Canadian environmental aesthetician Allen Carlson puts forward the artistic model and the environmental model of nature appreciation. The ecological model is the latest one brought forth on the basis of the other two models. The ecological model coincides with Chinese appreciation of nature. It holds the belief of ecological humanism, but not anthropocentrism, which contends that human and nature are active participants in an experiential mode of dialogue, just as what is put forward in the case study of Wang Wei's poem (Li 2018, 82-95).

3. Temporal Dimension of Cross-Cultural Research

In terms of the relationship between tradition and modernity in China, Li spotlights the temporal dimension of intercultural researches. This current trend in research focuses on the continuity of the development of Chinese literature and culture from ancient to modern times, trying to bridge the tradition and modernity. To support his argument, Li first interprets the *Book of Changes* (周易, Zhouyi) from the perspective of modern aesthetics. All of the hexagrams in the *Book of Changes* are composed of Yin and Yang, where the natural phenomena are taken as correspondence with human society. This holistic ancient Chinese thought is different from Western thought regarding the separation of human beings from nature. The *Book of Changes* can be interpreted from three perspectives of modern aesthetics, that is, literary aesthetics, life aesthetics and ecological aesthetics. The interpretation of the *Book of Changes* from the perspective of ecological aesthetics is closest to the ideology and nature of the *Book of Changes*, while the interpreting from the point of view of life aesthetics as well as literary aesthetics can be covered by that of eco-aesthetics.

Then, professor Li turns to the thoughts of Confucius (孔子), Mencius (孟子) and Xunzi (荀子) and, as in the case study of *Book of Changes*, tries to interpret them from the perspective of modern literary theory and aesthetics. Li suggests that Confucius' thought and philosophy was inherited by both Mencius and Xunzi, but was carried forward from a different, even opposite perspective. This formed a fertile breeding ground for an early Confucianism and was embodied in Confucius' theory of benevolence. Mencius' theory of the inherent good of human nature, and Xunzi's theory of the inherent evil of human nature are the main points of Confucianism.

By focusing on these three "founders" of Confucianism more than 2000 years ago, Li attempts to demonstrate that the early stage of the Confucian school of thought had a profound influence on traditional Chinese aesthetics. Some main concepts and ideas, such as harmony and the harmonious combination of the ideal of physical beauty and moral goodness, which serve as the main pillars of traditional Chinese culture and aesthetics, find their roots in Confucianism. Li concludes that unlike Western aesthetics, which emphasizes rational analysis, Chinese aesthetics is rooted in the manifestation

of intuitive patterns, revealing the characteristics of traditional Chinese aesthetics. These characteristics can be traced back to Pre-Qin Confucianism (ie before 221 BC).

Next to the Pre-Qin Confucianism, in a chronological order, Li discusses Confucianism in Han dynasty, Song dynasty and Ming dynasty from the perspective of modern literary theory and aesthetics. Representative figures and their ideas such as Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒) and New Text School (今文经学, Yang Xiong (杨雄) and Old Text School (古文经学), Cheng Yi (程颐) and Zhu Xi (朱熹) as the Cheng Zhu School of Li (程朱理学), and Lu Jiuyuan (陆九渊) and Wang Shouren (王守仁) as the Lu Wang School of Xin (陆王心学) are introduced to show the development of Confucianism over different times. This is done with the intention to prove that the tradition of Confucianism is not static, but rather the opposite. At the same time, the point Li wants to make is that although there has been a great change over time, the development of Chinese culture from ancient to modern times is continuing, well into the Chinese culture of our time. We should look at these changes with an open mind, and it would be incorrect to say that Chinese culture has become just another form of Western culture during the developments of modern time.

A similar situation also occurred in the development of Beijing city's culture. Beijing as a city has more than three thousand years of history, and eight hundred years of history as the capital of China. New Beijing still has many buildings in traditional architectural styles and contains within its boundaries many pre-historical and historical relics and Hutongs, although their numbers have dwindled over time. All of these buildings have left their cultural trails in modern Beijing, and together form the multicultural space of the city. Professor Li advances the theory that Beijing as a city is a converging spot of cultural exchanges/communications in which boundaries seem more blurred and geographical location keeps changing. At the same time, it is proposed that the city's inner dialectics of simultaneously being central and marginal should be reflected on in relation to its complex relationships with the projects of modernity with Chinese features and, to what extent, the city could remain distinctive from Western modernity (Li 2017, 19-28).

Professor Li also shows an interest in studying the field of cultural industry. In particular, he presents the development of China's micro film over the past ten years. Based on his observation, China's micro film genre has undergone a rapid development because of the technological changes related to inter-media practices. Focusing on three types of micro film production, he tries to outline some characteristics of China's micro film genre. He takes *A Murder Case Triggered by a Steamed Bun* as the first type of microfilm, which is a parody of the movie *Wuji*. The second one is concerned with conspiracy, including inter-text and inter-media conspiracy, and is illustrated

by the microfilms *Imminent* and *The Only Choice*. And the last type of microfilm production focuses on social welfare, and is represented by *I will give you happiness when I grow up*. All these productions are designed to provoke our thinking about how to coordinate and harmonize the conflict that arises between social welfare and market efficiency. To this regards, Li believes that Chinese microfilm productions will eventually be regulated into China's model of socialist cultural productions. This model is different from the time when the government managed everything during the planned economy and is also different from the cultural policy models in the west (Li 2016, 67-75:)

However, the differences between China and the West are not an insurmountable hurdle, and therefore will not prevent intercultural dialogue. Just as it is written in the Bible "Do to others what you would have them do to you", and said by Confucius "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others", the perspectives can be different, but the aims are the same. There is a strong believe that different cultures of China and the West, or that of ancient and modern times, have no absolute gap, and shared universal values will unite different people in different places and different times (Li 2014,113-122).

4. Conclusion

Professor Li has been deeply engaged in the study of comparative poetics and aesthetics between China and the west in recent years and is committed to building a new set of theories of intercultural interpretations. This book, as well as his other works in this field including *Intercultural Vision: Critique of Culture and Aesthetics in Transition*, *Intercultural Aesthetics: Transcending the Dualism Model of Chinese and Western Duality*, *Multidimensional Model of Cultural Interpretation*, shows that he has been actively expressing the "Voice of Chinese Scholars" in the international academia with consistency and ambition. Professor Qingben Li breaks through the long-standing dualism of China /the West and initiates the concept of multi-dimensional model of intercultural research in the realm of aesthetics. Furthermore, it can be affirmed that he enriches his theory through elaborating its historical context and connotation, fundamental principles, theoretical models and research methods systematically, thus helping Chinese aesthetics to achieve its model of innovation—developing from literary aesthetics to cultural aesthetics to intercultural aesthetics and finally merging with the general trend of international aesthetics, namely, in an intercultural turn. As a result, it is made possible to better demonstrate the strength and achievements of Chinese aesthetic scholars on the international stage and better promote intercultural exchanges between Chinese and foreign aesthetics.

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