

Ralph Cohen, *New Literary History*, and Literary Studies in China

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IN THE HISTORY OF LITERARY STUDIES, as well as in the humanities more generally, there are two sorts of people who influence and push forward the development of literary studies in a particular cultural context: one by means of insightful theoretical thinking, the other by means of organizational ability. I should mention in particular two eminent American literary scholars who have influenced not only my own career as a Chinese scholar of literature, but also literary studies in China more broadly. These two people both have close relations with the prestigious journal *New Literary History*. Fredric Jameson, one of the advisory editors of the journal, not only influenced my studies on postmodernism in the Chinese context but also helped reroute China's postmodern studies and cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s with his monumental work on postmodernism.¹ Ralph Cohen, founder of the journal and editor during the past forty years, not only helped reorient my own academic career, but more importantly, helped reorient the study of literary theory and comparative literature in China during the last ten years, thanks to the impact of *New Literary History* as well as the volume he edited, *The Future of Literary Theory*. About three years ago, when I was attending the fourth Sino-American Symposium on Comparative Literature held at Duke University in 2006, I told Jameson of my desire to see Ralph Cohen. Jameson immediately expressed his gratitude for the considerable help Cohen had given him in the early part of his career. I am sure that many of today's prominent literary scholars are likewise indebted to Cohen. But in this essay, I will first reflect on Cohen's help to me and his unique contribution to literary studies in China before dealing with the remarkable role played by *New Literary History*.

Ralph Cohen in China: A Personal Retrospective

Although Ralph Cohen visited China only twice, in 1994 and 1995, both visits remain significant to literary studies in China generally, as



well as to my own career. Unlike many other Western scholars who visit China only to give lectures or for the purposes of tourism without any continued cooperation with Chinese scholars, Ralph played a prominent role in reorienting literary theory and comparative literature studies during the 1990s. Today, when I recollect his two visits to China, I cannot help, first of all, thinking of my first essay published in *New Literary History* in 1993, which laid a solid foundation for my literary studies in an international context and allowed my work to be noted by international scholars during the past ten years. In this respect, I feel all the more indebted to Cohen for his insightful suggestions for revision and his far-sighted perspective on the future of literary studies in China.

During the academic year of 1990–1991, at the invitation of Douwe Fokkema, the former Director of the Research Institute for History and Culture at the University of Utrecht, I did my postdoctoral research in the Netherlands. Occasionally, due to the fact that very few Chinese literary scholars were carrying out postdoctoral research in Europe or North America, I was invited to lecture at some European universities. I understood that my European colleagues were especially interested in the current state of literary and cultural studies in China in a broad cross-cultural and international context. For the purpose of satisfying their expectation and promoting Chinese literature and literary studies abroad, I prepared a long paper, “Western Influence and Current Chinese Literature: Cultural and Theoretic Trends and Literary Creation,” in which I traced the origin and development of some major Western cultural trends and literary theories in China (including psychoanalysis, structuralism and poststructuralism, existentialism, modernism, avant-gardism, and postmodernism), how these Western cultural and theoretical trends had influenced modern Chinese literature, theory, and criticism, and how some of the major Chinese writers and literary critics have received these trends in a dynamic and constructive manner, paving the way for a modern Chinese literary and critical tradition. I lectured on this topic at over ten leading European universities and received favorable responses.

Since I could only lecture on certain parts of my paper each time, many of my European colleagues asked me when and where the full text of my paper would be available as an article in an English-language journal. I consulted with Fokkema as to which journal was the most prestigious in international literary-theoretical circles and the most appropriate for my article. He advised me to try *New Literary History* and patiently helped me to revise my article so that it would meet the journal’s basic requirements. After some time I received a letter with a number of very insightful ideas as to how my article could be revised



to make it valuable to an audience of English-speaking literary scholars. In this three-page signed letter, Cohen informed me that if I focused on following his suggestions, he would be glad to publish the revised version of my article. I was greatly encouraged and replied immediately, indicating that I would try my best to revise or even rewrite my article for publication.

I also read Cohen's edited volume *The Future of Literary Theory* and was deeply impressed by the whole volume.² I hoped it would be published in Chinese because Chinese literary scholars were in urgent need of such a book to reorient our future studies on literary theory in a broad international context. As it happened, my friend Wan Xiaoqi, then the Editorial Director of the Literary Section of the China Social Sciences Publishing House, told me that he had received a translation of *The Future of Literary Theory*. Because the translation was unsatisfactory, however, he wondered whether it was worth having the version revised before publishing it in Chinese. I immediately advised him to proceed after glancing over the manuscript and confirming that this excellent volume, if translated, would contribute a great deal to the development of China's literary theory and criticism. Wan took my advice and undertook to revise the Chinese version of the volume. I then went to the University of Toronto for a half year's research at the Northrop Frye Center (where Cohen had once lectured as a Northrop Frye Professor), during which time I finished revising my article for *New Literary History* in March 1993 and had it published in November the same year.³ The Chinese version of *The Future of Literary Theory* was also published in June 1993 and immediately received favorable responses from China's literary theorists and critics. All the major literary theorists and scholars, such as Qian Zhongwen, Wu Yuanmai, Tong Qingbing and Yue Daiyun, have cited it extensively in their critical and theoretical works. Indeed, the book not only informed Chinese scholars about what was current in Western academia but also provided us with some future orientations for literary and cultural theory. Both Wan and I thought that we should explore the possibility of inviting Cohen to visit China in order to promote the book in the Chinese context and also to lecture in some leading Chinese universities. Thus Cohen's first visit to China materialized in 1994.

May 26, 1994 was an unforgettable day for me as well as for the Cohens: a grand ceremony was held in honor of Ralph Cohen at Peking University, during which he received an honorary guest professorship, and after the ceremony he gave a lecture on the role played by literary theory in the process of literary and cultural change. The next day, I accompanied him to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, where he



lectured at its Institute of Foreign Literature. As was expected, Cohen's first visit to China was very successful in promoting *The Future of Literary Theory* and also *New Literary History*. And some of China's eminent literary scholars, such as Li Funing and Yue Daiyun of Peking University and Qian Zhongwen, Wu Yuanmai, and Zhao Yifan of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, all realized that in doing research on Western literary and critical theory, they could not gain a comprehensive picture and thorough understanding of contemporary theoretical change without reading *New Literary History*. In discussing issues in literary theory and criticism in the Chinese context, many scholars and theorists would quote the volume, and now and then some scholars of Western literary theory would also quote articles published in the journal.

Undoubtedly, after this first visit, Cohen became one of the best-known American literary theorists in China, together with Jameson and J. Hillis Miller. All three eminent scholars have continued their cooperation and exchange with Chinese literary and critical circles ever since. Cohen himself made a deep impression on China and established more academic exchanges with his Chinese colleagues. The joint sponsorship by Peking University and the University of Virginia of an international conference on "Cultural Studies: China and the West," held in Dalian from August 6–10, 1995, was a very fruitful result of his visit. Before this significant conference, Cohen had already given a keynote speech at the first International Conference on Chinese and Foreign Literary Theory held from August 1–4 in Jinan. Those present at the Dalian conference included over sixty literary theorists and scholars from China, the United States, and Europe. Terry Eagleton and Ralph Cohen delivered keynote speeches. Unprecedented in the history of modern Chinese literary theory and criticism, the conference covered a wide range of topics, such as the historical evolution and current state of cultural studies in the West, theoretical issues in cultural studies in contemporary China, the interaction and complementarity between cultural studies and comparative literature, the possible dialogue between Chinese and Western theories, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and their critical response in China, and cultural studies and the future of literary theory. Almost all the leading Chinese media and journals of literary studies reported on the conference, and a reporter from the BBC interviewed me about the success of the conference and future cooperation between Chinese and Western scholarship. A special issue of *New Literary History* published selected conference papers, with quite a few Chinese names making their first appearance in its pages.⁴ This special issue, largely due to Cohen's efforts, constitutes a landmark in the history of China's cultural studies.⁵ Many of the above-mentioned theoretical issues are still heatedly



discussed among current Chinese literary and cultural studies scholars. As Rey Chow comments in her review of the conference papers, the special issue really covers a wide range of topics:

[T]he comparableness between Chinese and Western revolutionary thinkers such as Mao and Gramsci (Liu Kang); the legacy of Hegel, through Marxism, in contemporary Chinese philosophy and the germaneness of Habermas's theory of communicative action to Chinese postmodernity (Ersu Ding); the increasing prominence of postmodernism and postcolonialism in Chinese intellectual circles, and the problems arising therefrom (Henry Y. H. Zhao, Wang Fengzhen, Shaobo Xie); the validity and relevance of postcolonial criticism, including the concepts of the nation, the "third world," and "indigenous culture" (Shaobo Xie, Sheldon H. Lu, Wang Fengzhen); the viability of "occidentalism" as a response to "orientalism" (Wang Ning).

Their range and diversity notwithstanding, these suggestive essays also project, once again, that ongoing collective need, felt by Chinese intellectuals since the turn of the twentieth century, to come to terms with "the West".⁶

The monumental role played by this *New Literary History* special issue in contemporary China cannot be neglected. It marks the beginning of the internationalization of China's literary and cultural studies. Recognizing this, we cherish all the more our memory of Cohen's visits to China.

Translating Western Journals into Chinese

To be sure, in the history of Chinese modernization and modernity, translation has played a very significant, even inevitable, role. By introducing into China such Western concepts as "science" (kexue) and "democracy" (minzhu), translation helped to bring about political and scientific transformation. It is also through translation that such Western movements as Romanticism, realism, modernism, and postmodernism helped to inspire literary and cultural change. But translating Western learned journals into Chinese is obviously a contemporary event, or more specifically an event of the twenty-first century. In this respect, too, *New Literary History* has taken a lead.

It is well known that *New Literary History* played a prominent role in introducing the work of eminent European literary theorists and thinkers to American academia. At the time of its founding, Cohen realized, there was no "English literary journal devoted to critical theory or to a reconsideration of literary history, its nature and possibilities. *New Literary History* was conceived as a move against the critical current; its aim was to inquire into the theoretical bases of practical criticism and, in doing



so, to reexamine the relation between past works and present critical and theoretical needs.”⁷ Under Cohen’s unbroken tenure of editorship over the past four decades, the journal has not only published essays by such eminent Anglo-American literary scholars as Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, Terry Eagleton, Stanley Fish, Fredric Jameson, Norman Holland, Ihab Hassan, Frank Kermode, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, and George Steiner, but also essays by continental European thinkers and scholars from a number of fields, including Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Tzvetan Todorov. We could even say that it is through the forum of *New Literary History* that some of these European theorists became familiar to English-speaking literary scholars and then to the international scholarly world, especially in China. The works they published in the journal have actually written a new Western literary and cultural history for the late twentieth century, one that is certainly enlightening to Chinese scholars. It was in recognition of this fact that I, after discussing the matter with Cohen both in person and through correspondence, started to edit a condensed version of *New Literary History* in Chinese translation in 2001.⁸

When *New Literary History* was founded in 1969, there was no English journal that inquired into literary theory and criticism from an international, theoretical, and interdisciplinary perspective. When *Critical Inquiry* was later founded in 1974, it was for the purpose of “competing with *New Literary History*.”⁹ And indeed, during the past decades, through such friendly rivalry, these two leading journals have overseen the major changes within literary and cultural criticism as well as humanities scholarship in the West. *New Literary History* also helped bring about the birth of a number of other prestigious journals of literary studies in English-speaking countries.

In the Chinese context, too, as was to be expected, after *New Literary History* took the lead in publishing a Chinese edition both in the mainland and in Taiwan in 2001, quite a few other Euro-American journals followed suit: the photocopied edition of *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* (edited by Wang Ning), brought out by Tsinghua University Press in 2003; the condensed Chinese edition of *boundary 2* (edited by Wang Fengzhen), published by Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe (People’s Literature Press) in 2004; the different Chinese edition of *World Literature Today* (edited by Zhang Jian), published by Beijing Normal University Press in 2008; and the condensed Chinese edition of *Narrative* (edited by Tang Weisheng), brought out by Jinan University Press in 2008.¹⁰ Given how long it usually takes to absorb a book-length monograph in English, the publication of these prestigious journals in Chinese will no doubt



help Chinese scholars, as well as a broader reading public, know what is going on in Western literary and cultural academia—although none of the above-mentioned journals can compete with *New Literary History* in terms of international reputation and interdisciplinary influence. The journal has also strengthened the academic exchange between Chinese and Western scholars, paving the way for the internationalization of the humanities in contemporary China more generally. As a fruitful result of such frequent exchange, more and more up-and-coming Chinese scholars are becoming familiar with the research interests, cutting-edge theoretical topics, English writing style, and even the format of these international journals; and they have started to contribute good articles of their own. At the same time, some of these journals have also organized translations of eminent Chinese scholars' works, so that, even though China itself has a large reading public, they may reach a wider international audience. I am sure that the academic value and far-reaching significance of translating Western journals into Chinese will be recorded in the future history of Chinese literature and culture.

Toward New Orientations for Literary Historiography

While we appreciate Cohen's outstanding academic achievements in the study of eighteenth-century English literature, genre, aesthetics, and literary theory, we pay particular attention to his far-sighted vision of literary studies at present and in the future. His great efforts to broaden the scope of contemporary literary studies and rewrite literary history have undoubtedly illuminated Chinese scholarship. And the fine example set by his journal has prompted us to think about how to offer a new Chinese literary history to our international colleagues.

Perhaps, to some people, the writing of literary history or literary historiography has become an old topic since the challenge of reception theorists and, later, of New Historicists. But in today's global context, rewriting literary history is associated with issues of canon formation and reformation, constituting a fourth aspect to the future of literary theory summed up by Cohen in 1989: "Seeking the new, redefining the old, and the pleasures of theory writing."¹¹ Although some scholars might well think it inappropriate to talk about questions of new literary historiography, as literary study in an age of globalization appears less and less meaningful, we still have much to say about the rewriting of literary history, especially in the face of changes in language and culture as well as in the connotations of literature. According to Tzvetan Todorov, "the field of literature has broadened" as "it now includes,



alongside poems, novels, short stories, and dramatic works, the immense domain of narrative written for public or personal use, essays, and reflections." In general, "Literature opens to the infinite this possibility of interaction and thus enriches us infinitely. It brings us irreplaceable sensations through which the real world becomes more furnished with meaning and more beautiful."¹² To popularize his concept of literature, Todorov also emphasized his literary doctrine during his lecture tour in China in 2007.¹³

Although the scope of literature has now been expanded, it remains closely related to the aesthetic by virtue of the aesthetic representation it provides of the world and human beings. But nowadays, since literature has acquired a new face, literary study should also change and expand its domain. Literary scholars not only deal with elite literature, they should also offer an analysis and critique of popular literature, even though the latter severely challenges the former. Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdés grasped these changing connotations of literature, and they offer a reconsideration of literary history in the Western context. In a changing world, they affirm, we should rethink an established genre of literary history written on the national model, but such rethinking "is not only thinking again; it is thinking anew. It is not a question of revising or revisionism; of correcting, altering, amending or improving. Rethinking means reconsidering, with all the associations of careful attentiveness and serious reflection allied with the notion of consideration."¹⁴ Since there are still writers who produce literary works, and scholars engaged in literary studies, there is a need to rewrite literary history. But this sort of rewriting should be done from new perspectives. Rewriting literary history is also being attempted under the auspices of the International Comparative Literature Association, which has so far organized the publication of twenty-three volumes of *The Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*.

All the above attempts at rethinking and rewriting literary history offer us insightful illuminations. But unfortunately, all their rethinking or rewriting of literary history has been fulfilled within a Eurocentric or Westcentric mode of thinking, neglecting an important literature defined by a long history and splendid tradition. Since literature has changed so much that the boundary of literary study has largely been redrawn, we should also find new paradigms or models for rewriting literary history. In speaking of the globalization of literature and culture, we cannot but think of the current tendency of English, which has been undergoing a sort of splitting or metamorphosis from one (standard) English into many (indigenous) Englishes, as English has become a global language through which different national cultures produce their own anglophone



literatures. The study of international English literature has long been a subdiscipline of literary studies along with the increasing expansion of the English language. To this project the postcolonial model of questioning and deconstructing a hegemonic imperial literary canon has certainly contributed a great deal.

The same is true of Chinese literature: its changing face has enabled it to move from a national literature to a transnational and postnational literature. In proceeding, by way of conclusion, to consider the writing of literary history in a Chinese context, I hope to follow an invitation Cohen has recently issued, in keeping with his lifelong attention to the changing history of literary history itself. “‘Literary history’ and ‘the global age’ have been intertwined in numerous ways,” writes Cohen, inviting scholars to decide “what they consider ‘literary history’ to be, what aspects of globalization, if any, influence it, and how electronic transformations have participated in such changes.”¹⁵

If we cannot deny that writing literary history in English, or in different Englishes, leads to a crossing of boundaries between nations, then what about writing a literary history in Chinese, also one of the major world languages whose boundaries are expanding day by day? Chinese has changed its status from a national language (used chiefly in China) to a regional language (used in some Asian countries) and finally to a real international language (used chiefly in the Chinese communities of North America, Europe, and Australia). Although Chinese is spoken by over 1.3 billion people as their mother tongue, it used to be “marginalized” and shadowed by the linguistic hegemony of English. Promoting Chinese worldwide does not merely mean popularizing the Chinese language worldwide; it also calls for a new literary history in Chinese. Here, perhaps, lies the significance of my new model of rethinking and rewriting a literary history whose basis lies in language.

In the Chinese context, we have produced many books on the history of Chinese literature, but very few of them deal with Chinese literary history from the perspective of language. Unlike international English literature, international Chinese literature is still far from a mature discipline or research area. But since writers from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas have contributed to the flourishing of Chinese literature, why do we not think of writing a new literary history in Chinese?

As one of the pioneering figures in international Neo-Confucian studies, Tu Wei-ming once enthusiastically promoted his inclusive concept of “Cultural China,” but its influence was long restricted to the limited sphere of the Chinese communities in North America. In the current age of globalization, Tu has revised this old concept by expanding its



domain. To him, “Cultural China” now consists of three forces: people from mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan; diaspora and overseas Chinese; and overseas foreigners who are interested in and study Chinese culture.¹⁶ Although Tu deals with Chinese culture and civilization in general, I, inspired by him, hope to extend this concept to the study of literature and the rewriting of literary history. Of course, exploring the possibility of writing a new literary history in Chinese is a larger project that calls for more systematic discussion in a separate article, so here let me simply frame a tentative conclusion: Chinese scholars of literature should rethink the established literary history written in Chinese and find new models for writing a history of literature in the Chinese language.

For of all the published books on Chinese literary history, none of them has really touched upon this topic, and yet it is an urgent one in the present era. Since Chinese is, like English, splitting more and more into many “Chineses” characterized by indigenous accents and even grammatical rules, it is becoming a major world language, used not only by domestic Chinese people but also by overseas Chinese as well as non-Chinese-speaking people who either take Chinese as a research area or teach or study it as a foreign language. Similarly, since the end of the 1970s, thanks to large-scale Chinese immigration worldwide, more and more Chinese people have been writing literary works in this hybrid language. Given its frequent use in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Chinese communities in North America, Australia, and Europe, excellent literary works are appearing that deserve to be studied and included in literary history. In this way, we can tentatively define Chinese literature in two senses: the first is the literature written in greater China—mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan—in a Chinese that is a national language or mother tongue; the second is the literature written overseas in a Chinese that is the writer’s mother tongue but not necessarily his or her national language. And the study of Chinese literature should include all literatures written in the Chinese language. Thus international Chinese literature studies will become a subdiscipline in the broader context of comparative literature and world literature.

Since the closing of the twenty-ninth Olympic Games in Beijing, “China fever” and “Chinese fever” have attracted increasing international attention. In extending our tribute to Ralph Cohen, I profoundly appreciate the great efforts he has made towards rethinking new literary history in general, and his unique contribution both to the internationalization of China’s literary studies and to Chinese literary historiography.



NOTES

- 1 As for Fredric Jameson's lecture tour in China in 1985 and its far-reaching effect, cf. Chen Chen and Yin Xing, "Yichang yanjiang yu xinshiqi xueshu zhuanxing," (A speech and a transformation in China's academic change in the new period), *Zhongguo tushu pinglun* (China Book Review), no. 1 (2007), 76–79.
- 2 Ralph Cohen, ed., *The Future of Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1989). The Chinese translation was done by Cheng Xilin et al., *Wenxue lilun de weilai* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe [China Social Sciences Publishing House]), 1993.
- 3 Cf. Wang Ning, "Confronting Western Influence: Rethinking Chinese Literature of the New Period," *New Literary History* 24, no. 4 (1993): 905–26.
- 4 The special issue "Cultural Studies: China and the West" was published in *New Literary History* 28, no.1 (1997), including articles by such Chinese and Western scholars as Terry Eagleton, Shaobo Xie, Ersu Ding, Henry Zhao, Wang Fengzhen, Wang Ning, Liu Kang, Jerry Flieger, Sheldon Lu, and Jonathan Arac. Rey Chow was invited by the editor to write a commentary on all the essays.
- 5 As for the role played by the *New Literary History* special issue in China's cultural studies, cf. Wang Ning, "Cultural Studies in China: Towards Closing the Gap between Elite Culture and Popular Culture," *European Review* 11, no. 2 (2003): 183–91.
- 6 Rey Chow, "Can One Say No to China?" *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 147.
- 7 Cohen, "The First Decade: Some Editorial Remarks," in "Anniversary Issue: I," *New Literary History* 10, no. 3 (1979): 417.
- 8 The first volume of the Chinese edition of *New Literary History* was edited by myself, and published by Tsinghua University Press in 2001 in simplified characters, and then in complicated characters by Foguang University Publishing Center in 2002. As for the significance of this event, cf. Wang Ning, "Translating Journals into Chinese: toward a Theoretical (Re)Construction of Chinese Critical Discourse," *New Literary History* 36, no. 4 (2005): 649–59.
- 9 During my talk with W. J. T. Mitchell, he said this to me, while recognizing Cohen's superb editorship and the wide international reputation of *New Literary History*.
- 10 The publication of these journals in China takes different forms: *Perspectives* was published in an English photocopy in 2003–2005, but it is no longer published; selections from *boundary 2* were published in 2004–2006, but stopped after three volumes; *World Literature Today* has been published in different versions, including essays directly written in Chinese, since 2008; and selections from *Narrative* have been published since 2008.
- 11 Ralph Cohen, ed., introduction to *The Future of Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1989), vii–viii.
- 12 Tzvetan Todorov, "What Is Literature For?" *New Literary History* 38, no. 1 (2007): 16–17.
- 13 Although Todorov visited China in October 2007 chiefly for the purpose of attending an international conference on Bakhtin, he also lectured at some of the Chinese universities and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences on the broad topics of humanism.
- 14 See "Preface: Theorizing Literary History in Dialogue," in Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdés, eds., *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), ix.
- 15 Cohen, introduction to "Literary History in the Global Age," *New Literary History* 39, no. 3 (2008): vii.
- 16 Cf. Tu Wei-ming's keynote speech "Multicultural Dialogue among Civilizations" delivered at the 9th Triennial Congress of Chinese Comparative Literature Association and the International Symposium, Beijing, October 12, 2008.



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