The Buddha's Moon Reflected on a Thousand Rivers

By Allard M. Olof

The song is composed of cantos of two verse lines, except the first canto which consists of one line only. It opens with lyrical verses, followed by tales of earlier lives of the Bud- dha and his career in our world, and the whole story is full of supernatural events. In 1449, when Prince Suyang ruled as King Sejo, he had the two works combined in a new edi- tion, but in the course of time large parts of the works have been given; sometimes the meaning of the name is translated into modern, flanked by a facsimile of the original, both for the rare translation of a Middle Korean literary work.

The translation gives the best possible interpretation and strategies of accumu- lating cultural capital shed helpful ana- lytical light on the behaviour of the avant-garde literati of that time. Hocks also notes, however, that the usefulness of Bourdieu’s theories is diminished on considering the strong impulsive to col- lective, as opposed to individually dis- tinct, action within modern Chinese literature.

Stephen Dodd’s essay offers a valu- ably personal view of the function of literary theory as a tool for the critic to achieve a quasi-scientific objectivity (one of the aims that fuelled its genesis in the twentieth century), Dodd asserts that ‘everyone is involved in some kind of theoretical position’. While established literary theory can offer a stimulating smorgasbord of choices, it is crucial that the critic maintains a flexible self- awareness of the personal intellectual baggage he or she brings to a text.

Dodd’s thoughtful perspective is rep- resentative of the balanced, non-polem- ical tone that unites these essays, whose aim is to provide a vociferous voice for some of the most influential and innovative East Asian literary writers, all of whose works are translated in this collection.

By Julia Lovell

The Limits of Literary Theory

Reading East Asian Writing

Over the past two decades, scholarship on East Asian, and in particular on Chinese literature has been transformed by the application of Western critical theory. From being the exception, theoretically informed approaches have become increasingly prevalent. Although old-fashioned, plain-speaking aesthetic criticism has far from disappeared, the work of scholars such as Roy Chow and Lydia M. Liu has had a significant impact on the field and on upcoming generations of researchers.

These, and other relevant questions, have been raised in various public forums since the early 1990s. Reading East Asian Writing is the latest contri- bution to a fifteen-year-long global conversation among thirteen scholars of Chinese and Japan- ese literature to consider the question: does Western literary theory work in East Asia?

The contributors vary widely in their ap- proach to the issue. Some plunge straight in with practical applications of theory to specific works of literature; others concentrate on theoretical structures inherent within the organization and study of literature; again others consider the uses and pitfalls of critical theory. Roy Chow, the doyen of literary theories in modern Chinese literature, takes a direct approach, draw- ing together a short story by the mod- ern Chinese writer Lao She and texts by Walter Benjamin, in order to illuminate the complexities of Lao She’s position as a patriotic, nation-loving author. Not unim- portantly, does ‘theoretical speak’ tend to produce frustratingly obfuscating analysis?

By Allard M. Olof

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The illustrious ruler, King Sejong the Great (reigned 1418-1450 at the beginning of the Korean Yi Dynasty, 1392-1910) personally supervised various scientific projects in the fields of sinology, medicine, astronomy, and geography. However, modern Koreans remember him for having invented their national alphabet, now called han’gul. His son, Prince Suyang, used this brand-new alphabet to compose the ‘Detailed Record of the Buddha’s Life’ (Sŏkpo sangojŏ), commissioned by his father in honour of the Prince’s mother, the beloved Queen Sohôn who had died in 1445. He submitted this first work of prose in the Korean language to his father in 1447. It was compiled from translations of Chinese Buddhist sutras, and King Sejong used it as source for his poetic version, The Song of the Moon Reflected on a Thousand Rivers (Wŏrin g’anggigaek, 1449).

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Dodd’s thoughtful perspective is representa- tive of the balanced, non-polemical tone that unites these essays, whose aim is never to divert from cultural, rea- soned argument. More nominative than conclusive, this stimulating collection offers a wide-ranging discussion of questions, but there can be no definitive answers.

References


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