Languages and Literatures Today

Report on the 26th International Congress of FILLM, Ningbo, China 2014

Yi Chen
University of Toronto, Canada

How is the mysterious and wonderful phenomenon of language and literature possible and how does it impact our way of thinking, evoke our imagination, and change social structures? These questions are of constant relevance. With the theme "Languages and Literatures Today", the 2014 FILLM Congress set out to take stock. Following on from the "World Literature" theme of the federation's previous Congress in Halden, Norway (2011), scholars from all over the globe gathered in Ningbo, China from the 17th to the 19th of June to consider the diversity and dynamics of communication in a world that is shedding its cultural boundaries yet at the same time struggling with the constraints of new political and ecological realities.

African society and culture played a prominent role in plenary talks by Hein Willemse and Tope Omoniyi. Both focused specifically on the complexity of contemporary Sino-African relations. Omoniyi discussed how Mandarin Chinese has become an established part of African post-secondary degree programs, whereas indigenous languages are often reduced to optional courses. More and more Chinese-sponsored Confucius Institutes are being established, teaching Chinese language, culture and values in those African countries that China considers its 'brothers'. Omoniyi joined other Western and African intellectuals in questioning the implications of such 'fraternal' relationships, in which China might simply parallel, if not actually replace, Britain as a "neo-imperialist force". African languages are not forgotten, however. Among African writers in the diaspora, the tension between native and acquired languages is often seen in local and global perspectives. Leena Eilittä, for instance, showed how the Nigeria-born US author Chimamanda N. Adichie uses words from her native language in her English short stories to express the emotional complexity of being an African novelist in North America, far from her cultural roots. Such

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particular use of language, Eilittä argued, also introduces African culture to readers outside the continent and shows the complexity of cultural traditions found among such emigrated writers.

An awareness of diaspora communities is a cultural phenomenon shared by Africans and Chinese alike. Lucas Tromly presented the Chinese perspective in his talk "Asian American Narratives of Culinary Tourism". Tromly examined the culinary practises described by three Asian-American authors: Jen Lin-Liu, Anne Mah, and Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan. He argued that these narratives show that the idea of the 'homeland' is merely an illusion. Rather than focusing on a 'native' heritage, Tromly argued, these narratives seem more interested in establishing common ground between Asian immigrants and their North American audiences, thus making authentic Asian food go beyond its original cultural boundaries. In these stories, the loss of a 'homeland', according to Tromly, reflects a "palatable multiculturalism" that transfers Asian into American culture.

Is the 'homeland' the here-and-now that we live and enjoy at this very moment rather than a vague concept imposed on us by our supposed ethnic or cultural identity? Perhaps the sense of 'foreignness' is dynamic. In a stylistic analysis of *Foreigners*, Daria Tunca argued that polyphony is fundamental to the work of British-Caribbean author Caryl Phillips. Tunca emphasized that the polyphonic nature of Phillips' fiction is not "behind" but "within" the text, and rather than trying to impose any correct interpretations, Phillips' invites readers to engage with their own alternative experiences by weaving "different reading experiences" into his stories. Su Ping also focused on Phillips, exploring how he creates and controls shadows to emphasize a depressive and gloomy sensibility towards alienation and social inequality – a literary equivalent to 'low-key lighting'. Her thorough and detailed analyses of scenes in Phillips' four major novels (*The Final Passage*, *The Nature of Blood*, *Dancing in the Dark* and *In the Falling Snow*) showed the powerful effects created through his skilful literary adaptation of this cinematic technique.

A sense of 'foreignness' and 'otherness' need not always be threatening and disconcerting, but can be viewed as idyllic and utopian. Petra Broomans, for instance, looked at how the Inuit culture of Eastern Greenland was portrayed by European scholars in the early twentieth century, and whether they saw the Inuits as another example of the exotic 'noble savage' or as part of a larger European culture (Greenland being after all politically connected to Denmark). Using ideas from cultural transfer studies, imagology and postcolonial studies, Broomans focused her discussion on the Danish philologist William Thalbitzer (1873-1958) who considered Inuit songs to be

"pure poetry" and thought their way of life expressed a "noble simplicity". Broomans also drew attention to Dutch critic Menno ter Braak's (1902-1940) reception of Thalbitzer's work, emphasising the importance of Ter Braak's description of Thalbitzer's *Eskimo Songs from East Greenland* as a kind of "double translation". Broomans also showed how such considerations are in fact closely related to a critical understanding of the Dutch East Indies.

If aboriginal people and their cultures (for long considered the Other in the West) are a source of imagination and a point of departure for scholars and critics, then dealing with the existence of this 'otherness' is a potentially life-changing challenge for politicians. Tom Clark's talk investigated the complex relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians through a comparative study of the manuscript of Paul Keating's famous "Redfern Park Speech" and his delivery of the same speech. Clark showed how the struggle for reconciliation is reflected in the interplay "between the written and spoken word".

The question of 'us' and the Other is normally thought to derive from a Western intellectual imagination relating itself to the rest of the world during the period of Western colonization. But what about the 'Eastern' perspective? How is this issue addressed in, for instance, China, Japan and India?

China has been tremendously influenced by Western ideas ever since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Li Cao focused her paper on I. A. Richards and William Empson (the important voices of New Criticism) and the time they spent teaching at the most prestigious Chinese universities at the beginning of the twentieth century. Cao explained that the thoughts and critical theories of both men were important for Chinese intellectual culture and its reception of Western ideas; in particular, they helped to stimulate a 'scientific' spirit in China which opposed traditional Confucian ethics. These debates occurred at a critical moment of transformation in Chinese history when China was forced to look beyond its borders, towards modernity.

If the urgent issue for China at that time was how to obtain national independence from Western colonization, then today one of the most challenging issues is how to address the ecological disasters precipitated by three decades of modernization and economic development. Ecocriticism attracted much attention from both Western and Chinese scholars at the Congress. For example, when Xiaomei Wu described contemporary Chinese ecocriticism as a kind of revival of Western Romanticism, questions from the audience directly addressed China's severe ecological problems: how

does China react to these challenges and what is the contribution from literary criticism? Although Wu's presentation implied that ecological issues in China remain to a certain extent taboo, Geoff Hall noted that Chinese university students show great interests in such problems. Whether the Chinese government will reconsider its attitude and practically engage with global concerns about climate change is still not clear, but the interest and sense of responsibility among Chinese students may reflect a potential that goes beyond the theoretical framework found in current Chinese views on ecocriticism.

Freedom of the press is also a longstanding taboo in China. Nancy Liu looked at this issue in translations of news stories from English into Chinese. Liu's careful study showed how different translations of the same news story reflected the struggle between competing ideologies in contemporary China. Another long-time taboo is, of course, sex. Lily Yu looked at the differences between Ai Xiaoming's Chinese translation of *The Vagina Monologues* and Eve Ensler's original text. Yu argued that, when it comes to the choice of information, Ai's feminist approach is more concerned with the context of the target language than remaining 'true' to the thoughts and ideas of the original author. The life of the text has to be recreated through adaptation, changes and translation, and is meant to be detached from the original. In addition, Yu also emphasised how Ai's translation reflects China's ability to receive such "sensitive" and "shocking" literature.

Both labelled as the 'Far East', China and Japan are inevitably related to each other, but their relationship has not always been pleasant, of course. Daniela Kato's paper explored the "highly ambiguous subjectivity" in the travel writings of the British artist and writer Emily Kemp (1860-1939) and the Japanese poet and translator Yosano Akiko (1878-1942). Both travelled extensively in the "contact zone" of pre-war Manchuria and Kato argued that their experiences on the intersection between Japan and China reveal the complexity and multi-layered dimensions of the notion of the 'Far East'.

Although China and India are also geographically close there is today much less cultural exchange between these two countries than between China and the West. In ancient times, the relationship was different, however. Buddhism, for instance, had a significant impact on Chinese culture and social structure. As we learned from Guo Cheen's paper on "the possibilities for Buddhist translation theories to emerge in the English-speaking world", we can still today imagine how China has been powerfully shaped by a collective translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Chinese during the Han and Tang dynasties, the peak of ancient Chinese history.

Whereas India and China have not had close bonds for a long time, British and Indian culture and society have been closely linked over the past three hundred years. Meenakshi Bharat discussed how the Indian film industry has adapted Jane Austen's novels, and how the world of English country life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century has been translated into contemporary India. Bharat argued that Austen's novels have shown themselves capable of generating interesting productions through encounters with the Indian mind. The most enticing field, as Bharat demonstrated, is the "interstices" between these two cultures and the shift of nuances that occurs through adaptation.

'Adaptation' is an interesting phenomenon that normally occur by moving a cultural creation out of its original context, as Julie Sanders pointed out in her plenary lecture on how Shakespeare's plays have been adapted "beyond English", in a global context. By showing examples from film adaptations of *Othello* from Mexico, Malaysia and India, Sanders examined how shifts occur not only through the change of medium, from theatre to film, but also that they are largely determined by the cultural, geographical and linguistic contexts of these adaptations. It is important, Sanders emphasized, to ask to what extent such adaptations can still be called "Shakespearean"? Where do traces of "Shakespearean language" remain?

Fundamentally, Sanders' paper looked into the meaning of the 'same'. How do we define what is the 'same' and what is 'different' in the first place? The question is quintessential when we consider the very conditions of comparison. Although in recent decades, the 'comparative method' has been hidden behind the scene of literary studies, and Comparative Literature has been generalized to the study of any type of 'foreign' culture, discussions on the theme of diversity at the Congress were in fact based upon the site where comparison originally begins: encounters with the Other. It is at the concrete sites of encounters with the Other (rather than in any pre-given historical influence or cultural identification) that productive comparisons arises; and it is also there we find the sort of opportunities which allow us to engage with our own experiences and see further, and all the more differently.

A meaningful and productive encounter cannot be taken for granted, however. Yi Chen's paper explored the conditions of comparison by looking at Paul Celan (1920-1970), the quintessential poet in German after the Second World War, and Wáng Wéi (701-761), one of the three greatest poets in the Táng Dynasty, the peak of classical Chinese poetry. Chen described her specific approach to comparison as "phenomenological",

because the textual relationships are sought out by comparing the "phenomena" of the poems, rather than discovering historical and/or biographical influences between the authors. In other words, the relationship did not exist prior to the comparison. By applying the comparative method to the process of textual analysis and translation, Chen developed a visual grammar to create diagrams that capture the configuration of the relationships between the poetic objects of the poems and the superposition of different translations. Such conceptual but tangible "textual landscape" illuminates the "phenomenological depth" of the poems, through which the concept of the 'same' is presented in its multi-layered complexity by a dialogical co-existence between the complementary differences of the poems.

Comparison is to discover new relationships through encounters with the Other. It does not, however, simply aim to 'tolerate' the Other's existence, but also attempts to see itself as an Other. In this comparative perspective, we see the potential of FILLM's goal of diversity: it is not simply a wish to pursue exotic literary tastes and strange linguistic features, FILLM has the potential to regenerate the Western tradition from within. In his opening address, departing FILLM President Roger D. Sell highlighted that communication is an essential goal of literary and linguistic studies in general, and that it is fundamental to FILLM's mission to encourage communication which values both diversity and quality of dialogue.

In concluding I wish to add a personal note to this concept, 'communication'. It is especially interesting when a true 'encounter' happens; in particular, when it takes place where communication would otherwise seem impossible. Shin-ichi Morimoto showed in his paper on Haruki Murakami's novels that communication cannot be taken for granted, and that notions such as "universality" and "identification" are not self-evident facts. What one could look into, perhaps, are the conditions that may coax out genuine encounters and communication. The FILLM Congress in Ningbo provided such conditions in plenty, and there was much more potential there than this report could even hint at. Instead, to quote Paul Celan, the 'word' is right there, and is coming: it is *im Herzen*.