

## Surfaces



# INTRODUCTION TO AND DISCUSSION SUMMARY OF PAULINE YU'S "DISORIENTATIONS: CHINESE LITERATURE IN THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY"

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Article abstract

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**INTRODUCTION TO AND DISCUSSION  
SUMMARY OF PAULINE YU'S**  

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**"DISORIENTATIONS: CHINESE  
LITERATURE IN THE AMERICAN  
UNIVERSITY"**

Ernst Behler

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the context of the Second International Conference on Humanistic Discourse, this text introduces Pauline Yu's "Disorientations: Chinese Literature in the American University" and reports on the central concerns that emerged in its discussion.

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Dans le cadre du deuxième congrès international sur le discours humaniste, ce texte est une introduction à «Désorientations: la littérature chinoise dans l'université américaine» de Pauline Yu, et rapporte les principaux pôles d'intérêt qui ont émergé au cours de la discussion.

Among the various forms of cross-cultural relationships between Western and East Asian expressions of the humanities, Pauline Yu's paper focuses on the institutional aspect. She looks at the Western angle of this relationship and concentrates on that institution where such relationships are mediated, the North American university and, more precisely, the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures, where American scholars and students study China and other East Asian subject matters. Pauline's particular approach can be seen as investigating the unproven assumptions which have guided the study of China in such departments. Reading this paper, one realizes not only the perspective of an East Asian scholar looking critically at the development of her own discipline, but also the perspective and experience of an administrator, Dean of the Humanities at a major North American university, viewing East Asian studies in the wider context of the various disciplines in the humanities.

By way of a broad survey, the paper presents the history of Chinese studies, first in Europe (the work of Italian, French, and German missionaries) and, then, at the turn of the last century in the United States (generous donations of endowed chairs). From the beginning of these studies, Pauline senses a tendency to read China through the filters and lenses of Western scholarship and to understand the otherness of China by relating it to something familiar and known in the Western experience.

The year 1945, the end of the Second World War, marks a turning point in the development of these studies. With the return of people from the war, thoroughly trained in East Asian languages and culture, systematic graduate education in Chinese and Japanese languages and literatures became possible. The number of doctorates and academic careers in East Asian languages and literatures increased considerably. Whereas during the first pre-war period Pauline notices a privileging of classical, premodern literature, this second phase had a more pragmatic character. The Western modernization theory was considered to be a tool with /pp. 5-6/

which the entire world could be shaped according to a Western image. The new universals in which China was embedded were the doctrines of political, economic, and social progress. The social sciences dominated this reception of China. Programs in area studies flourished. China was studied with a strategic purpose. This was the atmosphere of the cold war.

This period of Chinese studies was also determined by an academic discipline outside of the Asian departments, namely, Comparative Literature — a discipline which had existed since the beginning of the century, but now, after the end of the Second World War and promoted by immigrants such as René Wellek, Auerbach and Spitzer, came into its own. This coincided with the rise of Asian studies at the North American university. Several departments of Comparative Literature, those at Indiana University and the universities along the West Coast, for example, integrated Asian literature into their curricula, but also into their Eurocentric view of world literature. During this period, Comparative Literature still considered the designation "comparative" as essential. The task was to compare. And since factual relationships between Asian and European literatures did not exist, one studied East-West affinities.

This paradigm of Comparative Literature has now been replaced by one that is more dominated by theory, and the new universals with which Chinese literature is integrated are the theoretical universals of hermeneutics, reception theory, reader response, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and cultural studies. At this point, I cannot resist referring to the section on Page 15 of the paper depicting a comparatist who is entitled to the enjoyment of an endowed chair of transcendental subjectivity and for whom every moment of thinking becomes an object for judgment under his panoptic glance.

From the experience at my own university and as chair of a Comparative Literature department, on the West Coast, I should like to add that the present institutional atmosphere, as far as Asian studies is concerned, is marked by a Pacific Rim Mentality /pp. 6-7/

which to a certain degree is nurtured by the NAFTA Conference held by President Clinton in Seattle in 1993. This attitude is noticeable in grants that further contacts with East Asia and in other administrative actions.

Yet there is still another institutional aspect relating to the manner in which Asian departments are organized in the United States. Pauline refers to it toward the end of her paper, when she raises the question of why the Department of Asian Studies was never split up like the national departments of European languages and literature into departments of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian literatures. She comes to the conclusion that it was perhaps the attitude of the members of the Asian departments themselves which resisted a separation, recognizing that in the University there is strength in numbers.

If we look today at Stanford and other institutions where various literature departments have been integrated into one department, we realize that it is perhaps not our own will that determines academic structures, but the impact of the economy and other forces. All members of literature departments might one day find themselves under the same roof of a single literature department. Whether such departmental reorganization would bridge the cultural gap between Eastern and Western expressions of the humanities remains highly doubtful.

The discussion of Pauline's paper concentrated on the position of Chinese/Asian studies in the present university structure and the precarious balance between sameness and otherness that this position requires. A historical understanding of how the present organization has developed makes it easier to institute change (Pauline Yu). There is a European or Western bias in the establishment of disciplines (Murray Krieger), but there is also a rapid change in the perception of disciplines at American universities and these changes often are the effect of outside forces (Hazard Adams). Hendrik Birus asked for a clarification of the concept of discourse and the identification of some master-discipline /pp. 7-8/



devoted to all cultural phenomena such as "philology" at the beginning of the nineteenth century, philosophy in the classical sense (Jacques Derrida), interdisciplinary or intercultural programs for interculturally trained people (Wolfgang Iser). The discussion then turned to the reasons for the neglect of the humanities at our time. The flourishing of the humanities in the postwar period was seen as a result of the cold war. Now *Wissenschaft*, not *Bildung* is required (Hillis Miller). Jacques Derrida observed that the antagonism was perhaps not so much one of *Wissenschaft* versus *Bildung* but rather the result of a change in the notion of *Wissenschaft* from science to technoscience, relegating the humanities, together with their competence in deciphering, to a type of science that is considered to be obsolete. L. Lee and his colleagues Lin Yaofu, C. Kumakura, W. Tay, and Wang Hui brought the discussion back to the topic of Chinese studies at American universities by focusing first on the schools of international studies and the area studies programs these schools developed, when the study of modern and contemporary China was not of great interest. This attitude has drastically changed to an interest in the business aspects in the study of China and Japan. Ching-hsien Wang observed the strong emphasis on business Chinese and Japanese in Asian foreign language programs. Altogether today's students in the Asian departments of the United States are better prepared than students five years ago, programs are more developed, and a basic training in their subject matters can be presupposed (Pauline Yu). An important task remains with regard to foreign language instruction at the secondary school level, since students usually don't start with the study of foreign languages early enough (Hazard Adams). The general understanding between Western and Eastern cultures has been improved through an increase in communication (Wolfgang Iser).

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