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# Greater China and the Twenty-First Century <sup>1</sup>

## Eugene Eoyang

On the occasion of this meeting of Chinese comparatists, and as a conclusion of the fifth annual meeting of the American Association of Comparative Literature, I wish to offer some *fin de siècle* meditations and reminiscences along with some prospects, if not prophecies, about the future that awaits us in the twenty-first century.

In all the many projections into, and speculations about, the twenty-first century, what I find remarkable is the tacit assumption that there *will* be a twenty-first century. With the easy availability of fissile material in the former Soviet Union, downloadable instructions on bomb construction on the Internet, and violence more and more the solution of choice for unbalanced minds, I am not so sure. But, if we are to survive, it's more urgent than ever that we understand each other, particularly those we disagree with. It is in this perspective, on the assumption that we do, indeed, survive into the twenty-first century that I base my speculations.

One of the mantras of the last generation is that the twenty-first century will be the Asian century. Lately, the focus has become more specific, and it looks more and more that the next century will be "the Chinese century." Indeed, the *New York Times* for February 18, 1996, was devoted to a report on China, which is boldly titled, "The 21st Century Starts Here. China Booms. The World Holds Its Breath." A short concluding article, which reports on the impending shift of Hong Kong from Great Britain to the People's Republic of China on July 1, 1997, bears the catchy and superficial headline: "The Chinese Are Coming. Wait. They're Already Here." The piece focuses on Hong Kong but makes no mention of what is increasingly referred to as

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<sup>1</sup> Concluding address at the Fifth American Association of Chinese Comparative Literature International Conference, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, April 21, 1996.

Eugene Eoyang

“Greater China,” the global enclaves of Chinese all over the world, in the United States, in Canada, in Europe, in Costa Rica, as well as, more obviously, in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Taiwan. It is this “greater China,” and the role of these “overseas” Chinese that I want to focus on today.

Let’s start off by considering the vagaries of terminology. We refer to the Chinese outside of China, variously, as Singapore Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, Taiwan Chinese, Malaysian Chinese, Thai Chinese, Indonesian Chinese. Yet, in the United States, we reverse the order and commonly say “Chinese-American.” Could this suggest that the second word is the substantive, and the first the modifier? One might think so, except that most Chinese-Americans are not considered very American by Americans, and the Thai Chinese adamantly insist that, though they are ethnically Chinese, they are, at bottom, Thais. In Singapore, the government is predominantly Chinese, and Singaporean Chinese I have met think of themselves first as Chinese, and second as Singaporeans. And how do persons of Chinese descent, whether Chinese-American, whose formative life was in a Chinese culture, or American-Chinese, whose formative life was in the United States, how do we think of ourselves? Well, we think of ourselves as Chinese when we’re in the States, and as Americans when we’re in China. Indeed, one could say, we get the wrong end of both sticks. We are the victims of prejudice in the United States as part of the Asian ethnic minority, and we are the victims of envy and condescension in China because we represent hegemonic Western culture.

Michelle Yeh has detailed the storm of controversy that has surrounded Henry Yiheng Zhao and Xu Ben in the pages of the periodical *Twenty-First Century*, in which the bitterness between the native-born Chinese, *huaren*, and the overseas Chinese, *huaqiao*, has erupted.<sup>2</sup> There is a sanctimoniousness about this debate that has nothing to do with intellectual inquiry: the entire enterprise of proving ethnic and cultural authenticity strikes me as ultimately fascist. When one claims any form of

趙毅衡  
徐賁  
華人  
華僑

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<sup>2</sup> Draft version, “International Theory and the Transnational Critic: China and Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism.”

authenticity by virtue of race or native birth or continuous residence, one opens the way for a logic of cultural and racial exclusion and denigration that will lead to the expulsion of the “impure” and the “non-authentic” into concentration camps, real or imagined.

The false piety behind these attacks might be characterized as a kind of “holier than thou” sense of nativist superiority. These false pieties are rife throughout the world, whether in the form of: Christians who look down on non-Christians as benighted heathens; Third-World propagandists who vilify the First World for their hegemonic practices, as if there were no hegemons in the Third World; or Holocaust-mongers who regard everyone who were not victims of the Holocaust (or descended from those victims) as, inevitably, the perpetrators and accomplices of evil. It is perhaps ironic that the salvational dictum for our age should come from a convicted felon whose brutalization by the police was taperecorded for posterity: yes, along with Rodney King, we must ask, “Can’t we just get along?”

Liu Dong’s attack of Zhao and Xu, included in his piously overwrought article entitled “Beware of Artificial ‘Pidgin Scholarship’,” purveys the most arrant form of nativist arrogance when he writes:

劉東

In the continuous experimental process of “assimilation of the West into China,” the most wrongful thing is the appearance of the “marginal person” who finds no home on either side of the Ocean; in other words, the person who has no cultural identity which can endow him or her with a real sense of mission of a scholar (quoted in Yeh, 9).

This is colossally misguided, for by the same logic, every ignorant native is automatically a scholar. I prefer to offer a different, even opposite model, one that I detailed in the paper I offered to this group two years ago, and which I will repeat here:

We may be guided, I wrote, by the words of Erich Auerbach who said, as early as 1952:

In any event, our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation. The most priceless and indispensable part of a

philologist's heritage is still his own nation's culture and language. Only when he is first separated from this heritage, however, and then transcends it, does it become truly effective (17).

The truly effective heritage is, then, polyglot, a multilingual, not to say multicultural, perspective. Auerbach was an old-fashioned philologist, but his advice was distinctly postmodern in thrust. He enjoined us to revert to the view of a "prenational medieval culture" before national boundaries were determined, and he cited a text from the Latin of Hugh of St. Victor (*Didascalicon* III, 20), which Edward Said rendered in 1978 as follows:

The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land.

For Said as for Auerbach, what was of immediate relevance is "the humanistic tradition of involvement in a national culture not one's own" (Said 1978: 259). In 1982, Tzvetan Todorov ended his *Conquest of America* with the same quote, adding parenthetically and ironically: "(I myself, a Bulgarian living in France, borrow this quotation from Edward Said, a Palestinian living in the United States, who himself found it in Erich Auerbach, a German exiled in Turkey.)" (Todorov 1982: 250)<sup>3</sup> I think that Erich Auerbach, Edward Said, Tzvetan Todorov—each of them a "marginal person"—had more of "a real sense of mission of a scholar" than any cultural racist who offers nothing but his native credentials as certifications of his scholarship.

These smug self-satisfactions of a "native scholar," where being born and bred in the same place constitutes sufficient qualification to become a scholar, are—alas!—in no way restricted to scholars in China. We have altogether too many "scholars" of China in the West whose sole qualification for

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<sup>3</sup> I first cited these passages at the end of *The Transparent Eye*, in the concluding chapter entitled "Epilogue: Self as Other in Translation" (see Eoyang 1993). I revisited and deconstructed this exchange in the concluding address at the 1994 meeting of the American Association of Chinese Comparative Literature at Princeton University: the talk was titled, "'Tianya' (The Ends of the World or the Edge of Heaven): Comparative Literature at the *Fin de siècle*."

teaching Chinese is the fact that they are native Chinese. Had these natives remained in China, how many of them would have been deemed qualified to teach anybody anything?

There is entirely too much of what I call “the culture of blame,” whether of Holocaust re-hashers, or Third-World anti-hegemonists, or nativist Occidentalists, whether of the official or unofficial type, and there is not enough of “the culture of responsibility.” We find too easily the fault in others and not enough the blemishes in our own skin (dare I say to this group, “chinks in our own armor”?). Responsibility involves achievement not at someone else’s expense; responsibility entails an honest fidelity to the facts of history; responsibility entails a respect for not only another viewpoint, but also a sympathy for experiences alien to our own.

Frank Chin has publicly excoriated Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan for being culturally *irresponsible*, of writing out of what Sartre would have called *mauvaise foi*.<sup>4</sup> He criticizes them for distorting the historical record, and he singles out, in particular, Maxine Hong Kingston’s use of the Mu-lan legend to indict traditional Chinese society as inherently misogynist. There are exploiters of culture who have no scruples about their lack of qualifications in that culture.<sup>5</sup> But this is not to say that Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan are unqualified because they were not born and bred in China (neither was Frank Chin, who is a fifth-generation American-Chinese): there are good and bad exponents among native scholars just as there are good and bad exponents among non-native scholars. In the field of scholarship there can be no room for cultural racism.

木蘭

<sup>4</sup> On April 5, 1996 at the Midwest Asian American Student Union Conference at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Of course, he puts it in terms perhaps more incendiary: he calls Tan and Kingston “white racist writers.”

<sup>5</sup> In a review of Stephen Mitchell’s translation of the *Dao De Jing*, I point out that, neither from the viewpoint of originality nor from the viewpoint of scholarly fidelity can his version be anything but cultural exploitation (Eoyang 1990). Mitchell received an advance of \$140,000 to do the translation despite his ignorance of Chinese: he claimed as relevant expertise the fact that he is married to a Chinese-American, and the fact that he had studied Zen (*New York Times*, February 16, 1988).

道德經

From Bosnia to Rwanda to Chechnya to Korea, blood has been spilt over disputes about borders. The Balkans are being Balkanized again. One would think that modern technology—fax machines, jet travel, and the Internet—might have occluded if not erased national boundaries. Yet the prospect of a borderless world troubles even so liberal a thinker as Masao Miyoshi: he regards a borderless world as the global infiltration and unlimited empowerment of TNCs, Trans-National Corporations (Miyoshi 1993). Far from ushering in a post-colonial age, Miyoshi claims that “TNCs continue colonialism” (Miyoshi 1993: 749). The basis of TNCs is “the formation of a highly complex web across national borders. . . .” What Miyoshi finds pernicious is not the network itself, but the fact that TNCs have co-opted this network for the purposes of “industrial production and distribution.” Scholars, in their self-satisfied discovery of postcolonialism and multiculturalism, Miyoshi claims, far from uncovering the problem, indeed, “provide [themselves] with an alibi for their complicity in the TNC version of neocolonialism.” Postcolonialism is a mask for neocolonialism; multiculturalism is a disguise for unbridled corporate greed on a global scale (1993: 751).

There is much to learn from Miyoshi’s critique of a “borderless world,” but one might consider a different kind of transnationalism, a transnationalism not of corporations, but of culture. I see this transnationalism from a bicultural perspective, not, I hope, as the pawn of multinational corporations, but as the marginal person I am.

My vantage point is that of an American-Chinese, as I mentioned earlier, a person of Chinese descent whose formative experiences occurred, for the most part, in the United States. I mention this further discrimination of ethnic identity to avoid any accusations—all too rife on both sides of the Pacific—of cultural inauthenticity.

It seems that whether we’re Chinese-Americans or American-Chinese, we’re vulnerable to criticism from either side. We cannot be tempted to placate both sides, nor should we be seduced into favoring one side or the other. For our usefulness is precisely in the binocular perspective we bring to our work. We are more insiders than the outsiders, and we are more outsiders than the insiders. Elsewhere (in fact, at the 1992

meeting of this group at UCLA), I developed a theory of knowledge that requires that we be armed with both kinds of knowledge, both the familiarity of the insider and the perspective of the outsider (Eoyang 1994: 31). I adopted Kenneth Pike's use of "emic" and "etic" knowledge, that is, the understanding from within and the insight from without. We need to avoid the extremes that exist in both arenas, those who say only a native can understand, and those who say that only a non-native can understand.<sup>6</sup>

To Masao Miyoshi's TNC, "Trans-National Corporations," I wish to juxtapose a different TNC, a Trans-National China, a greater China, not merely in terms of global reach, but in terms of moral strength. I want to instill in us, as diaspora Chinese, a post-modern version of the ancient Confucian notion of *ren* which is both a homophonic allusion to humanity, and a semantic cognate of a sense of connectedness among and between humans. I not only want China to be great, I also want greater China to embody the most traditional of Chinese virtues, which, I'm convinced, will be crucial to the survival not only of Chinese around the world, but of everyone around the world. This Great and Greater China would differ from an imperialist model in the same way as Trans-National Corporations differ from Multinational Corporations. A multinational corporation, according to Miyoshi, "is one that is headquartered in a nation, operating in a number of countries. . . . A truly transnational corporation, on the other hand, might no longer be tied to its nation of origin but is adrift and mobile, ready to settle anywhere . . ." (Miyoshi 1993: 736). The Great and Greater China would be similarly diffuse and pervasive and equally without a headquarter. It would be a global network with a common heritage and with enlarged sympathies. Until we revitalize this sanctified notion of a commitment to each other, unless we give it our own modern definition, there's no point even discussing the prospects for the twenty-first century.

And in this vision, I see the *huaqiao*, as the ironic minority in the United States representing the most populous nation on

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<sup>6</sup> I don't think I am alone in encountering an occasional Western sinologist who claims that only he or she understands Chinese culture, and that Chinese are the last to understand their own texts!



earth, playing a crucial role. For we, the descendants of the Central Kingdom, “marginalized” not only by parochial nativists, but also by the Westerners whose world we inhabit, know what it is to be part of a major culture at the same time that we are part of a minority population. We know what it is to be both central and marginal. We can be the agents of change in negotiating between the arrogant centrists and the disenfranchised peripherals of the world, for in our lives and in our careers we have been outsider looking in and insider looking out. Wherever *there is*, we can say we have been there.

Let us ask about a survey course in Chinese literature in the twenty-first century: what would we include and what would we exclude? If we restrict our focus to denizens of the mainland, we would have to exclude writers from Taiwan and Hong Kong, such as Bai Xianyong, Yang Mu, Yu Guangzhong, and Zhong Ling. But if we extend our definition to include writers using the Chinese language wherever they live, some of these writers would have to be included, which is what Michelle Yeh did in her *Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry* and her *Modern Chinese Poetry: Theory and Practice Since 1917*. If we consider fiction, our nationalist definition would exclude such writers as Zhang Ai-ling, Chen Ruoxi, and Nieh Hua-ling. But, what if we, in our concept of Greater China, include writers of Chinese descent, regardless of language used? Then we would include figures from all over the world: from America, Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, David Henry Huang, Gus Lee, Fae Mayenne Ng, Lee Young-lee; from Canada, Sky Lee; from England, Timothy Mo—to name only the most familiar figures. I like to think that, preposterous as it may be to some, a history of Chinese literature in the future will put Guan Hanqing cheek by jowl with Frank Chin and David Henry Huang; that Pu Songling’s ghost stories might be fruitfully compared with those of Maxine Hong Kingston; that Du Fu’s poems on exile might be read along with those by Lee Young-lee’s. In other words, Greater China will be polyglot and multicultural—not unlike, if truth be known, pre-modern China, before the ideological stringencies of hegemonic Manchu rule enforced the false image of China as monolithic, monolingual, and monoracial.

And let us not forget, here in the United States—as too many descendants of immigrants, whether in California or in

白先勇  
楊牧  
余光中  
鍾玲

張愛玲  
陳若曦  
聶華苓

關漢卿  
蒲松齡

杜甫

Florida or in New York, tend to forget—that the United States of America is a country of refugees. The neutral term for them is immigrants; the august term is “émigrés”; but the realistic term is refugees. We have come to this country to seek refuge, whether from poverty or political oppression or religious intolerance or social intimidation. When we become part of the establishment, we should not fail to remember where we came from. The “boat people” of yesterday are as much a part of our heritage as the more ballyhooed passengers on the *Mayflower*. Three years ago, a modern *Mayflower* came to these shores, less sanctified than previous refugee ships, but no less full of hope and no less desperate. Life being sometimes more apt than fiction, this ship was called “The Golden Venture,” a tramp steamer that ran aground in the rough surf off the Rockaway Peninsula in Queens. Three hundred illegal Chinese immigrants were on board, each paying as much as \$30,000 to seek refuge in this country. Terrified at the prospect of being caught, some dived overboard and tried to swim ashore.

Bob Herbert, in a moving Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times* (April 15, 1996) entitled “Freedom Birds,” writes: On the second floor of 70 Mulberry Street in Chinatown is a small facility known as the Museum of Chinese in the Americas. One of its current exhibitions is “Fly to Freedom: The Art of the Golden Venture Refugees.” Many of the passengers of the Golden Venture are still incarcerated, some three years later, in various detention centers. During the endless hours of waiting, hoping against hope as time passes, investing day after idle day, these prisoners have taken to constructing works of art out of toilet paper, towel threads, magazines, writing paper, pencils, pens and magic markers. They worked and reworked their constructions into various figures, including some that resemble eagles, which they call “freedom birds.” “Visitors to the museum will see bird cages with freedom birds trapped inside, and a Statue of Liberty made from toilet paper, cardboard and magic marker, and a cheerful foot-and-a-half-high model of the Golden Venture” (*New York Times*, April 15, 1996, A11).<sup>7</sup>

These refugees, too, are our brethren, our fellow *huaqiao*, the crucial difference being that where we have realized our

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<sup>7</sup> On February 15, 1997, the *New York Times* reported that the Clinton Administration had decided to release the “Golden Venture” refugees from the prison: they were released on February 26, 1997.

hopes, their hopes are being held hostage. Compared to their sufferings, our disappointments pale in insignificance.

There is an essential and profound ambivalence that is our curse, our blessing, and our fate in being *huaqiao*. I take some solace in a pun in Chinese. Rather than despair that, as an American-Chinese, I will never command the native fluency of someone born and bred in China, I accept the hand that fate has dealt me. By resorting to a homonym, replacing the “man” radical with the “wood” radical, I also see myself as a “bridge,” a *qiaoliang*, something that spans two banks over an abyss. In the case of a *huaqiao*, that abyss is the Pacific Ocean. So, I see myself not only as a *huaqiao*, an “overseas Chinese,” I also see myself as a *huaqiao*, a “Chinese bridge.” When I understand my significance in this way, I realize that my mission is to be the best, most useful, and most serviceable bridge I can be. And extending the logic metaphorically, I ask myself what makes for a good bridge, and the answer I come up with is this: a bridge that is used often, a bridge with a great deal of traffic, a bridge that many people walk over. The bridge metaphor provides me with *ironic reassurance*, which salves the petty hurts and indignities that I may experience on either side of the Pacific. The buffets we get from both quarters are part of what I regard as my mission as a bridge, for I realize that a *good bridge gets stepped on, and often*.

橋樑

華橋

艾青  
獻給鄉村的詩

Ai Qing’s “A Poem Dedicated to a Village” (*Xian gei xiangcun de shi*) has the following lines:

I think of the wooden bridge over the brook nearby the village —  
A mere husk of a structure after repeated use,  
Year after year, its skinny struts barely visible in the water,  
So that the people of the village can cross over its humpbacked  
spine. (Eoyang 1982: 121, 358)

It is our destiny—our curse and our blessing—to be the best bridges we can be.

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