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Historicism versus Presentism: New Dynamics and Dilemmas of Humanities Education

以史爲鏡或古爲今用？當前人文教育的新挑戰

黃承元

Alexander C. Y. Huang

Author's Correspondence Information

作者通訊

黃承元 Alexander C. Y. Huang

Pennsylvania State University

E-mail : acyhuang@psu.edu

Abstract

This article analyzes the tensions between historicist (emphasizing the difference between cultures) and presentist (emphasizing the sameness) approaches to teaching global humanities courses to students in the twenty-first century. Are classics worth studying because they are universal and always relevant to readers in our times? Or is it because they provide an opportunity to re-examine the differences between "here and now" and "then and there"? If "classics" provoke debates in the classroom, they have accomplished the most important pedagogical goal. While the cultural logic of late capitalist reproduction and globalization seems to shrink distances, we should not fail to recognize the value of temporal and geocultural differences.

Keywords: new historicism, presentism, canon, Shakespeare, sinology, global cultural marketplace

Historicism and Presentism: New Dynamics and Dilemmas of Humanities Education¹

Relating the classics and historical events to the present time has been one of the biggest challenges for general education and the internationalization of humanities education in the United States. This article addresses the dilemmas of historicist and presentist approaches to teaching literature, drawing upon recent trends in two disciplines as examples: Shakespeare studies and world literature.

Are classics worth studying because they are universal and always relevant to readers in our times? Or is it because they afford a rare glimpse into the past? In other words, what are the relationships between "here and now" and "there and then"? As David Lowenthal has argued, "the past is a foreign country," the question that confronts us concerns the dynamics between the text's and the reader's historicity.² The recent new historicist and presentist debates over the meaning-making processes have highlighted questions about the politicization of artistic works, historical authenticity, as well as ideological authority. Time and again these scholarly preoccupations have been brought into humanities education in which the present is seen in the art of the past and vice versa.

Walter Benjamin famously defined work of art as possessing a unique "presence in time and space" and an "existence at the place where it happens to be."³ What remains unresolved is how this historicity of works of art should be confronted by critics who can only come "after" the works temporally and intellectually. To clarify what is at stake in the debates between the historicist and presentist approaches, let me begin with presentism.

Presentism, a critical operation that brings contemporary events to bear on pre-modern works, privileges the extended presence in time and space of artistic works and foregrounds the historicity of contemporary readers and critics. Alan Sinfield, a famous cultural materialist (and a "presentist" critic), writes provocatively, "Shakespeare, notoriously, has a way of anticipating all [future] possibilities." The presentist inclination of reading the present into the past has arguably given rise to some "timeless" and universal classics such as Shakespeare. These canonical works are said to be ahead of their times; many pre-modern works are said to be post-modern in design. Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes take one step further and argue that "we can never ... evade the present. If it's always and only the present that makes the past speak, it speaks always and only to"

¹ This short lecture was presented at the Conference on Humanities Education in an Age of Globalization at Hung Kuang University in Taiwan on 31 May 2007.

² David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

³ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zorn. Edited by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), 211-45.

ourselves and about ourselves.⁴

Scholars who subscribe to various forms of historicism approach the classics rather differently. In a defining statement about the new historicist approach, Stephen Greenblatt invites us to consider the implications of a conversation with the dead, if such conversation were indeed possible. In fact, New Historicism shares some assumptions with presentism, because the historian's "presentist" commitments can make historical reading of a text overtly self-interested, turning these readings into records of our present needs and anxieties. He writes:

I began with the desire to speak with the dead ... I wanted to know how Shakespeare managed to achieve such intensity, for I thought that the more I understood this achievement, the more I could hear and understand the speech of the dead. ... The mistake was to imagine that I would hear a single voice, the voice of the other. If I wanted to hear one, I had to hear the many voices of the dead. And if I wanted to hear the voice of the other, I had to hear my own voice.⁵

No doubt many of us would follow the powerful mantra, "to bring history to life," in our teaching. The polyphonic history that Greenblatt speaks of is one that challenges the instructors to bring to life. We work hard in the classroom to animate the past for the students, whether it is a literary work from the students' own culture or a foreign one. However, students in general education courses are usually not majors in the subject area and will rarely specialize in it in their later career. What, then, should our students learn from these conversations with the dead? Pressing issues in our age of globalization have intensified the relationship between past and present, and between local and foreign cultures. Arguing the case for either topicality or exclusive historical meanings will force us to reexamine our own motives and assumptions as educators.

If we look hard enough, we will surely find reflections of our times in historical and literary texts. But what are the philosophical and ethical investments in these meanings? Recently *Macbeth* was used by the U.S. government in a troubling way. In September and October of 2004, the U.S. Department of Defence and the National Endowment for the Arts funded tours of some Shakespeare plays to military bases throughout the United States. The Alabama Shakespeare Company's *Macbeth* was the most heavily promoted and the best-funded production for the military. It received one million dollars of Pentagon funds and toured to thirteen military bases in southern and mid-western United

⁴ Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, "Introduction: Presenting Presentism," *Presentist Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2007), 5.

⁵ Quoted in Garber 243. Marjorie Garber, "Shakespeare as Fetish," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41.2 (Summer 1990): 242-250.

States. The choice of *Macbeth* as the play to be highlighted invites speculation of the intended interpretations of the bloody tragedy when the U.S. was at war.⁶

The differences and connections between historicism and presentism remind us of what has been nominally acknowledged but not fully registered: that literary works exist in the world where belief systems are formed, collapsed, and reshaped; and that these works are not only products of belief systems at the time of their initial construction but also agents that have an effect collectively long after they were written. Literary works become meaningful, because they are full of meanings "deriving not only from [their authors'] will but also from the will of others for whom the works came to matter."⁷

Some scholars, such as David Kastan, have insisted that "what value [the literary works] have for us must ... begin with the recognition of [their] difference [and distance] from us,"⁸ while others believe that an overemphasis of this distance would only eradicate students' need to study any text that is not their own. It is true that we always see the past from "a perspective the past could never have had."⁹ However, in the context of general education, the dilemma is this: if students' ultimate interest is local and current exigencies, why study any literature written before today, much less foreign? On the other hand, if we are going to be strictly historical, "how can we justify coming at the subject through our [terms] (heterosexuality, homosexuality, repression) rather than theirs?"¹⁰

It is helpful to consider how Shakespeare, an author whom many believe is the foundation of the Western canon, has been taught in general education courses in the U.S. The first problem is that students often mistake Shakespeare as something that is "familiarily known" to any native English speaker. Paradoxically, what appears to be "familiarily known" is often never positioned to be properly known, or to be more accurate familiarily unknown.¹¹ The effect of this attitude is that key questions are evaded or overlooked. Some of the key questions include: Does Shakespeare matter? How does Shakespeare matter? To whom? The centrality of Shakespeare to English and Western literature courses has made it quite hard to have students confess ignorance, to admit the difficulty of construing the lines on the page.¹²

⁶ For a recent analysis, see Todd Landon Barnes, "George W. Bush's 'Three Shakespeares': *Macbeth*, *Macbush*, and the Theater of War," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 26.3 (Fall 2008): 1-29.

⁷ David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare After Theory* (London: Routledge, 1999), 19.

⁸ Kastan, 16-17.

⁹ Greg Dening, *Performances* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 58 and 72.

¹⁰ Bruce Smith, "Premodern Sexualities," *PMLA* 115. 3 (May 2000): 321.

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, "Vorrede," *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 3: 35.

¹² Cf. Lisa Jardine's account of her experience teaching at Jesus College, Cambridge, and Queen Mary and Westfield College in the University of London. Lisa Jardine, "Introduction," *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London: Routledge, 1996), 2-3.

Scholars in Taiwan may face similar issues when teaching subjects that are perceived to be "native" to the students' background, such as Taiwanese literature or Chinese classics. The cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz's model of studying cultural practices would be useful in this context. Both the instructors--who are overly familiar with the texts--and the students--who claim familiarity of plot outlines--would need to "make strange" of their own assumptions and cultures, which enables richly productive interactions between ourselves and our own cultural precursors, and between ourselves and those from completely different cultures.

I would like to suggest the dramaturgical approach as a teaching tool. Shakespeare and many other non-dramatic literary texts are performative in nature, and they invite us to read with "an eye and an ear to how the language functions" and how other signs function in performance--on stage, imaginary, or on screen.¹³ Dramaturgy may be a useful tool to reconcile the historicist and presentist modes of reading literature, because it creates rich opportunities for "holistic analysis" that is simultaneously historical and performative.¹⁴ Drama has a unique presence in time and space. First of all, it has a textual presence in print; second, the genre commands a stage presence. Any performance would have to wrestle with three distinct times and spaces: those of the current stage performance; those of the *fabula* or story; and the time when and space where the drama was written. These rich layers provide many teachable moments.

While those who teach Shakespeare have to wrestle with the students' alleged familiarity of Shakespeare, those who teach non-Western, or "world," literature have to deal with resistance of a very different kind. Recent scholarship has advocated the virtue of globally conceived, cosmopolitan models to teach and study world literature.¹⁵ A much contested notion is world literature in translation, especially how close reading should be done in an age of globalization and whether--amidst the politics of recognition--non-Western literary texts can or should be read side by side with their Western counterparts.¹⁶ Some of these issues arise from the ghettoization of the studies of non-Western literatures, and yet the comparative perspective that is supposed to benefit students in world literature courses does not always work. A recent critique on this

¹³ Ros King, "Dramaturgy: Beyond the Presentism/Historicism Dichotomy," Shakespeare in Europe--History and Memory: International Conference, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, 17-20 November 2005, unpublished manuscript, p. 13.

¹⁴ King, 7.

¹⁵ David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Haun Saussy, ed. *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ One of the more memorable debates about the Great Books was the one concerning the Stanford core curriculum on Western civilization in the spring of 1988. Wm. de Bary, and Irene Bloom, eds., *Approaches to the Asian Classics*. New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 1-5.

tendency is found in the powerful words of Rey Chow, a vocal critic of how the "East" has traditionally been approached in the academe:

More often than not, it is assumed that comparison occurs as a matter of course whenever we juxtapose two (or more) national languages and literatures, geographical regions, authors, or themes, and rarely do critics stop and ponder what the gestures of comparing consists in, amounts to, indeed realizes, and reinforces. These days, the term "comparative" is often used in tandem or interchangeably with words such as "diverse," "global," ... "transnational," and the like, ... yet the nebulosity of the term ... seems to persist in direct proportions to its popular usage.¹⁷

To truly internationalize humanities education, we have to begin with a more inclusive view of humanistic studies.¹⁸ Pauline Yu, the President of the American Council of Learned Society and a former Dean of Humanities in the College of Letters and Science at UCLA, also expressed concerns about the pervasive Eurocentrism and the continuous marginalization of non-Western cultures in the curriculum in American universities. To counter the "continuing dominance ... of Mediterranean humanistic concerns in Western academic institutions today," Yu suggests "reading and discussion of particular texts from disparate cultural traditions" should be a "core experience" in a "humanistic education."¹⁹

The teaching of world literature has witnessed problems arising from a different aspect of the historicist and presentist dichotomy.²⁰ While Shakespeare courses in the twenty-first century are often given the additional burden and mission to preach historical truth and Shakespeare's relevance to the present time, the mission for world literature courses is to counter both indifference to the subject and widespread presumptions about the non-Western world.

¹⁷ Rey Chow, "Introduction," *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in an Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*, ed. Rey Chow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 72

¹⁸ A. Owen Aldridge, for example, argued in 1986 that "the perspective of comparative literature as an academic discipline should be expanded to include all of the world, not only a favored segment of it." To achieve this, he was willing to accept translated texts as a tool, though translations should not be admitted in any context "in which *explication de texte* is being attempted" (11). While there has been a surge in English translations of Asian literary works over the past decade, very little has changed in relation to the bias toward non-favored (therefore less important) segment of branches of literary studies that Aldridge discussed two decades ago. Owen A. Aldridge, *The Reemergence of World Literature: A Study of Asia and the West* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1986).

¹⁹ Pauline Yu, Peter Bol, Stephen Owen, and Willard Peterson, eds., *Ways with Words: Writing About Reading Texts from Early China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

²⁰ Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Christopher Bush, *Ideographies: Figures of China and Japan in French Modernity*, Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2000.

The first problem, indifference, is manifested in the ways in which the field is structured. There is a prevalent theoretical imperialism within the Anglo-American academe, and the bias persists in forms of scholarly inquiries that have made Asia the perpetual Other to the West. Chow summarizes this situation as follows:

One may perhaps counter: life is short, you can't expect specialists of ancient Greek tragedy, the Italian Renaissance, ... or the English novel to know about happenings in the Pacific region. But that alibi -- of not having enough time ... --- is precisely the heart of the matter here because it is, shall we say, a one-way privilege. Such an alibi is simply not acceptable or thinkable for those specializing in non-Western cultures.²¹

This tendency is connected to the second problem, namely, the habitual mystification of non-Western cultures that is present in both popular and scholarly discourses. Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei finds a similar problem in the realm of theatre studies in North America, where "Asian theatre, whatever and wherever it is, remains the ultimate Other, unknowable, unlearnable, unfathomable, [because] the languages are imagined to be indecipherable, ... names are backwards, ... cultural values ... totally alien, ... [and] performers are trained from birth."²² Ironically, some scholars of Asian studies are willing to endorse this attitude, readily confirming the difficulty of their own specialty and the challenges of cross-cultural dialogues. On the one hand, the image of China in the popular and academic discourses around the world "overwhelms our appetite for contradictory descriptions and frustrates our established analytical and conceptual framework"; on the other hand, "old assumptions and methodologies nourished ... by an entrenched Eurocentric worldview prevalent in *both* China and the West" have hindered the development of more productive ways to understand China.²³ Under attack is post-structuralism and deconstruction's appropriation of the ideas of "China" that made these visions part of their method. Deconstruction is "unable ... to think about anything without to some extent thinking or dreaming about 'China'."²⁴

²¹ Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 13.

²² See p. 220 of Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, "The State of Asian Theatre Studies in the American Academy," *Theatre Survey* 47. 2 (November 2006): 217-223.

²³ Xudong Zhang, "The Making of the Post-Tiananmen Intellectual Field: A Critical Overview," *Whither China? Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China*, ed. Xudong Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 1; italics mine.

²⁴ Haun Saussy, "Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté: The Surprises of Applied Structuralism," *Reading East Asian Writing: The Limits of Literary Theory*, ed. Michel Hockx and Ivo Smits (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 40. Saussy was responding to Foucault's comments on Borges' imaginary "Chinese" encyclopaedia. Foucault wrote, "In our dreamworld, is not China precisely this privileged *site of space*? In our traditional imagery, the Chinese culture is the most meticulous, the most rigidly ordered, the one most deaf to temporal events, most attached to the pure delineation of space." Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*:

Examining the obsession from a different perspective, popular historian Jonathan Spence finds a "curious readiness of Westerners for things Chinese" that has existed "from the beginning" and has "remained primed" by unending offerings from China.²⁵ The roots for such biases are intertwined with the positions of both Chinese and Western scholars.

On the one hand, European sinologists (such as François Jullien) and philosophers (such as Leibniz) have repeatedly used rhetorically constructed differences of China to form an antithesis to European philosophy.²⁶ On the other hand, Chinese intellectuals also subscribe to the idea of identifiable and fixed boundaries that constitute Chineseness. Contemporary Chinese intellectuals' obsession with "Chineseness" that contributes to the fantasy that everything Chinese is "somehow better -- longer in existence, ... more valuable, and ultimately *beyond comparison*" (emphasis added).²⁷ This tendency on the part of the Chinese intellectuals is a "historically conditioned paranoid reaction to the West, [which] easily flips over and turn into narcissistic, megalomaniac affirmation of China."²⁸

As Zhang Longxi has argued, we need to problematize the habitual mystification of China and the non-Western world. Zhang advocated demythologizing China to "recuperate real rather than imaginary differences" but not "deny[ing China's] distance, its alien nature."²⁹ To achieve this goal, I believe we need to address not simply the question of literacy but the need for an intercultural literacy. Contextual and close reading is core skills in humanities, and especially in general education. As Pauline Yu has observed, any close reading of a text from a foreign tradition will reveal "questions that ... may stimulate students to take another look at those they have been trained to ask about and within the Western tradition. Equally illuminating ... will be the questions—and answers—that do not appear in the foreign text, which may similarly move readers to rethink ideas they have always taken for granted because of the culture-bound nature of the discourse to which they have been exposed."³⁰

To conclude, let us return to the two questions at the beginning of this article: Are

An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Vintage Books, 1994; published as *Les Mots et les choses* in 1966), xix.

²⁵ Jonathan Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: Norton, 1998), 241.

²⁶ François Jullien, *La Valeur allusive des catégories originales de l'interprétation poétique dans la tradition chinoise: contribution à une réflexion sur l'altérité interculturelle* (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 1985); François Jullien and Thierry Merchaisse, *Penser d'un Dehors (la Chinoise): Entretiens d'Extrême-Occident* (Paris: Seuil, 2000);

²⁷ Rey Chow, "Introduction," *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in an Age of Theory*, 3.

²⁸ Chow, "Introduction," *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in an Age of Theory*, 2-3.

²⁹ Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 52 and 54.

³⁰ Pauline Yu, "Comparative Literature and Its Discontents." *Approaches to the Asian Classics*. Ed. Wm. de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 364.

classics worth studying because they are universal and always relevant to readers in our times? Or is it because they afford a rare glimpse into the past? When we consider questions of temporality, we cannot evade the question of locality. Therefore, a third question to be asked is how the different cultural locations should be related in humanities education in an age of globalization. One of the paradoxes is the mutual exclusiveness of two approaches that, ironically, seek to expand critical possibilities and to accommodate the fluidity of globalizing processes. In recent pedagogical and scholarly approaches, there is a tendency to emphasize transnational contexts. The other tendency is to champion a recursion to the notion of the nation. There have been two main groups of these competing "metanarratives": one that envisions the multiplicity and hybridity of post-national cultural spaces, and the other that insists on the "continued importance of local differences" and "reinscribe[s] the nation into the critical discourse."³¹

Truly internationalized humanities general education courses should not subscribe to either mode of engagement. The main purpose of studying past or foreign cultural practices is not to add to the already long list of localities, nor to show what is different with the particular cases by footnoting existing theories. Rather, it destabilizes unexamined presumptions and stereotypes.

While the cultural logic of late capitalist reproduction and globalization seems to shrink distances, we should not fail to recognize the value of differences. Howard Goldblatt, a prolific translator and scholar of Chinese literature, usefully reminds us to be critically alert to the distance to be crossed when studying world literature in translation.³²

At stake is not simply the politics of recognition (from the perspective of a small and marginalized field³³) but also what Gayatri Spivak and Emmanuel Levinas have theorized as the translator's responsibility to cultural otherness.³⁴ Scholars of non-Western literature are not unlike translators who, contrary to the exigencies of an increasingly global market economy, have to retain the "marker of anterior presence" in their teaching and research.

³¹ June Yip, *Envisioning Taiwan: Fiction, Cinema, and the Nation in the Cultural Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

³² Howard Goldblatt, "Border Crossings: Chinese Writing, in Their World and Ours," *Chinese Aesthetics and Literature: A Reader*, ed. Corinne H. Dale (Albany: State University of New York, 2004), 211-228.

³³ Shu-mei Shih, "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition." *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 119.1 (2004): 16-30.

³⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translating into English." *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*. Ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 108

摘要

本文透過新歷史主義及當代主義的辯論探討二十一世紀多元文化教學的挑戰與新方向。在通識教育與國際化的人文教育中，經典的研讀一直是重要的一環。然而，學界對於經典的教學法和價值並沒有共識。本文透過探討美國大學的莎士比亞課程和世界文學課程提出反思：經典的價值在於引發辯論的空間，在於引發讀者思考自身歷史處境與經典世界間的拉鋸和辨證關係。作為詮釋方法論，新歷史主義及當代主義各擅勝場，在教學上應結合靈活應用。

關鍵詞：(新)歷史主義、當代主義、正典、莎士比亞、西方漢學、全球化的文化市場、多元文化教學、通識教育

黃秋韻

Chiu-Yun Huang

Author's Correspondance Information

作者通訊

黃秋韻 Chiu-Yun Huang

General Education Center, Yu Da College of Business

No.168, Shuefu Rd., Shuefu City, Miaoli, Taiwan, R.O.C.

E-mail: lionroar@ydu.edu.tw

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論文 Articles :

Historicism versus Presentism : New Dynamics and Dilemmas of Humanities Education

以史為鏡或古為今？用當前人文教育的新挑戰 / 黃承元 Alexander C. Y. Huang

從人文角度論通識教育的意義與任務

The Contemporary Value of General Education : A Viewpoint from Humanities / 黃秋蘭 Chiu-Yun Huang

夏山學校展現的民主教育精神

Spirit of Democratic Education in Summerhill / 郭實渝 Shih-Yu Kuo

自律與順從：阿多諾的半教育理論與博雅教育

Autonomy and Conformity : Adorno's Analysis of the Half-Culture and Liberal Education / 楊洲松 Chou-Sung Yang

海洋通識課程之內涵：知識取向的探討

An Epistemological Approach on the Connotation of Marine General Curriculum / 吳靖國 Chin-Kuo Wu

書評 Book Review :

赫欽斯「民主社會中教育的矛盾」中的博雅教育理念

A Review of The Conflict in Education in a Democratic Society by Robert M. Hutchins / 葉坤靈 Kuen-Ling Ye