Inter-Asian Comparative Literature: A Recapitulation

Lin Lien-hsiang

Mr. chairman, honorable guests, ladies and gentlemen:

In Panel 4, Inter-Asian Comparative Literature, we have had eight papers—two from Korea, three from Japan, one from Hong Kong, and two from the United States.

That we chose Wai-lim Yip's paper to start our panel on Inter-Asian Comparative Literature is not without significance. In his paper, he has managed to show us by some examples the trickiness of comparative studies of the literatures of the three neighboring nations of Korea, Japan, and China. Studies of the literatures of these three neighboring nations are tricky not because of their languages but because of their different national identities. National identity can easily lead to nationalism and national bias. Particularly among the three peoples of Korea, Japan and China, this problem of national identity is a very sensitive one owing to the rather complicated historical relationship that they share. Yip, however, has tactfully presented ways to help advance comparative studies of the literatures of the three neighboring nations, being fully aware of the problem of the national identity without mentioning it, and has also made a concrete suggestion as to how we can proceed in our intra-Asian comparative literature studies after the excellent example already set by Curtius' *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* in the study of European literatures.

Following Yip's paper was John Deeney's paper "Chinese-Eastern Comparative Literature Studies (the Case of China-Korea-Japan) Cultural Infrastructures for Social Superstructures." The aim of his paper is "to suggest a blueprint for comparative literature studies between Chian and its northern neighbors, Japan and Korea." He urges comparativists "to provide something of the cross-cultural context through interdisciplinary studies as well as traditional methodologies in order to establish a solid foundation for regional development in other areas."

Isamu Taniguchi presented his very interesting paper "The Chinese

Written Character as Semiogenesis." He began his paper with the name of Ernest Fenollosa and that of his posthumous essay—*Essay on the Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* and ended it with a quotation from Fenollosa "the ideogram is related to the ideograph, the ideograph is related to form, and form is related to the poem." We Chinese always tend to take the Chinese characters for granted. In a sense, we have become a little bit callous and insensitive to the beauty that foreigners very often find in the Chinese characters. It seems that we do need scholars like Fenollosa, Pound, and Taniguchi to remind us that the Chinese characters themselves are poetic and thus are good for poetry.

Sukehiro Hirakawa, when Wai-lim Yip tactfully passed by the touchy problem of national identity, bravely brought up that problem in his paper "Chinese Culture and Japanese Identity—Traces of Po Chü-i. in a Peripheral Country."

> In Japan Chinese influence was particularly strong in Heian (9th and 10th c.), Muromachi (15th c.) and Edo (17th and 18th cs.) periods. The Chinese poet most appreciated by Japanese through the first two periods was without doubt Po Chü-i. Po's immense popularity at the Heian court can be seen in many examples. There was, however, a reaction against the overwhelming Chinese influence. The psychology of cultural nationalism is clearly seen in a No-play "Haku Rakuten (Po Lo-t'ien)" by Zeami (1363-1443) in which an imaginary poetic contest takes place between Po Chü-i the representative of Chinese poetry, and an old Japanese fisherman, who turns out to be no other than a god of Japanese *uta* poetry. (Quoted from Prof. Hirakawa's summary of his own paper.)

The example Hirakawa quoted was very intriguing to us because we have been accustomed to hearing the overwhelming influence of Po Chü-i but seldom heard of the cultural resistence the Japanese launched against it. More intriguing was the story that he told at the end of his paper—the story of Admiral Yamanashi visiting Navy Minister Yonai at a big air raid shelter in the beginning of June, 1945, to recite to him Po's poem on grass. This poem-reciting visit helped cut short the terrible Pacific War and saved thousands and thousands of Japanese lives.

Kyu-bok Chung presented a typical influence study in his paper "A Role of the Gatha in Classical Korean Literature." A gatha is a chanting part in a Buddhist sutra. In Chung's opinion, the chanting part that one can find in

Korean classical literature comes from the gatha in Buddhist sutras by way of Chinese literature in which the gatha is also adopted. In this paper we deeply feel the Buddhist tie that joins Korea and China.

Kwang Yong Chun like Hirakawa, challenged himself with the thorny problem of national identity in his paper "Usage of Chinese Characters in Korean Literature." It is well known that before the promulgation of the Hunmin-Jong-Um, the Korean alphabet, in the fifteenth century, the Korean people relied on the Chinese written characters for their written communication. Even after the promulgation of the Korean alphabet, the Korean people still aspired to mastering the Chinese writing system until the end of the Second World War. It was only after the Korean people acquired their long-coveted national independence that the Korean government began to promote a national policy of phasing out the presence of the Chinese characters in the Korean language, perhaps, due to their strong wish to establish or regain their national identity, a very distinct national identity that lies between Japan and China. Chun gave a brief account of the history of the Korean writing system and that of its status quo in connection with the Chinese written characters, but hesitated to give an evaluation as regards the cultural impact that the absence of the Chinese characters will produce on the future of Korean culture. Of course, this is again a sensitive matter of national identity and even national pride.

Dominic Cheung presented another typical influence study across the three national literatures of Korea, Japan, and China. His paper "With You A Part of Me – A Study of New Tales of the Trimmed Lamp, Tales of Moonlight and Rain, New Tales of the Golden Carp and the "Ghost-wife" Theme in China, Japan, and Korea." Cheung made a very detailed analysis of the three ghost-wife stories as to their similarities and differences. We regret that he could not go further and make an aesthetic evaluation of them. The Chinese *Ai-ch'ing-chuan* 愛卿傳 *(The Story of Ai-ch'ing),* which served as the prototype, could do nothing to adjust itself, but the Korean story of *Lai Sheng Looking Over the Fence* and the Japanese story of *The Home amid the Thatches* were supposed to have been written after the prototype. So how were they written to appeal to their different readers? Have they achieved their goals? What are their aesthetic achievements? Questions like these should be asked and answered. Here I am finding fault with Cheung chiefly because I find it a pity that he should have stopped there, just a few steps before he could reach the final goal. He is pursuing a right track in intra-Asian comparative literature; however, he needs encouragement to go further

than mere analyses of similarities and dissimilarities.

Last but not least, Tour Haga brought to us the fruit of his favortie study of Tao Yuan-ming's *Peach Blossom Spring* and its influence on East-Asian literature and art. In the past few years, Haga has been following closely the traits of Tao Yuan-ming's influence upon the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese literatures and arts through his legendary poem *The Peach Blossom Spring*. The first thing he did was to read into the passages of the poem and further into the poet's mind. The depth of his understanding of the poem made us doubt whether we Chinese know our favorite poet that much. Should Tao Yuan-ming be present here today, he would definitely say this to him: "Prof. Haga, you seem to know my poem and me better than I do myself. Next time if people should ask me about my poem and myself, I would simply tell him to go and see you!" The color slides he showed of all the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese paintings on the "Peach-Blossom-Spring" theme that he had found were quite amazing – how differently those painters of the three countries interpreted the same poem in their paintings! There is no doubt that Haga's collection of "Peach-Blossom-Spring" color slides will constitute a milestone in intra-Asian comparative literature studies.

When comparative literature originated in Europe as an academic discipline, it was actually engaged in intra-European comparative literature studies. Should the same thing happen here in Asia, we Asian comparatists should now be chiefly engaged in intra-Asian comparative literature studies as the history of this academic discipline is still very young in this part of the world. Besides, culturally, the four big countries of India, China, Korea, and Japan are closely related first in religion and second in literature. Particularly, the literary relationship among the latter three was once closely knitted together by the use of the same writing system. The soil is rich for such comparative literature studies, but the reality seems to be pointing to a different direction – most of our Asian comparatists are engaged in comparative studies of their native literatures with Western literatures. We cannot deny the importance of such studies since Asia has been greatly under Western influence, both economically and culturally, during the past two centuries. We should, however, point out our negligence of this rich uncultivated field of intra-Asian comparative literature studies. It is with this reality in our minds and with a hope that interest would be aroused in the minds of our Asian comparatists in exploring the rich field yet to be explored that the Fouith International Comparative Literature Conference in Republic of China set up a separate section of Intra-Asian Comparative Literature.

Well, as you can see, we have had a good start. We do hope that in our next Conference in 1987 we can enjoy a greater harvest in this field.