

Stephen Yao

A Rim with a View: Modernist Studies and the Pacific Rim

Review of *International American Studies* 4/1-2, 36-39

2009-2010

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.



A RIM WITH A VIEW: MODERNIST STUDIES AND THE PACIFIC RIM

Stephen Yao

Hamilton College

In what follows, I want to outline an agenda for the study of Modernism in which the rigors and opportunities of an expressly transnational comparative methodology take center stage. To do so, I also want to suggest some ways in which the field of Modernist Studies can enrich its approach to both the decidedly international cultural scope and subsequent global spread of Modernism by entering into an engagement not only with Area Studies, but also with more recently emergent (as well as non-historically defined) fields such as Ethnic Studies. For the aggressively multi-lingual and cross-cultural features of canonical Modernist literary production and its distinctive strategies of signification amount to much more than merely a pervasive thematic and formal interest among various European and American writers. Rather, they point toward a deeper dimension of transnationalism that itself comprises one of the most salient, yet still largely untheorized, conditions for the very historical emergence of 'Modernism' as a cultural phenomenon, not only in Europe and the US, but most especially in various other parts of the world and in different non-Western languages, particularly those of the Asian 'Orient.'

What I am calling here a 'Pacific Rim' approach to Modernism goes beyond either a concern with 'origins' or 'influence', taking as a premise the political dimension of cultural engagement and representation. Rather, it focuses on the dynamics of movement and transformation within the context of a particular geographical formation. In this way, we can begin to leave behind methods that seek to fix our conception of 'Modernism' as a stable and unified notion, a view that tends to reproduce established hierarchies of cultural value in which, not surprisingly, the West occupies a dominant and originary position, whether as source or teleological endpoint of different ideas and processes. Instead, we can open up new avenues of research and teaching that examine the constitutive interactions between traditional Western Modernism and other parallel movements around the world, to the mutual illumination of both.

Moreover, it seems a critically significant irony that Western domination itself reached various crucial junctures during the 'Modernist' era as it has conventionally been periodized. Thus, for example, the historical span from 1900–1945 (especially the years between the two World Wars) witnessed the steep decline and partial disman-

tling of various official European empires, most notably the British, and the solidification and expansion of the American one. Not insignificantly, these shifts in global power played out in large measure in and across the space of the Pacific Ocean. Complicating matters even further, the rise of a specifically Asian colonialism in the form of Japanese imperial expansion, which eventually came to be justified under the ideological euphemism of the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere', also occurred within the same geographical region and historical span.¹ As a fundamental consequence of these transnational historical events, moreover, during this period many non-Western and so-called third-world nations and traditions began explicitly to engage in cultural terms with the advent of socio-political modernity. Together, these complex phenomena in turn led to such conceptually and historically related, yet still culturally and linguistically specific movements or phenomena as *xian dai zhu yi* in China, *modernismo* throughout Latin America, and *modanizumu* in Japan, among others.

Hence, the Modernist epoch offers not only the unique opportunity to examine both late and early stages of recent imperialism simultaneously, but also abundant possibilities for comparative studies of differing and perhaps even incommensurate 'modernisms' in various contexts around the globe. In addition, migrations of peoples from different parts of the world to various Western nations reached new levels of intensity, or at least critical phases in their history, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with correspondingly important developments in non-African (American) minority cultural production. And so, the emergence of a number of specific ethnic cultures within the West, especially those contained within the larger rubric of 'Asian American', can be usefully understood as a crucial, if perhaps obverse, dimension of Modernist expression. As David Palumbo-Liu has argued elsewhere, 'Managing the modern was inseparable from managing Asian America' (Palumbo-Liu, 1999: 17) in early 20th century US history.

Such unexplored territories, as it were, indicate the generative role that attention to comparatively non-dominant traditions can play in broadening the scope of Modernist Studies in its current state. Furthermore, the particular dynamics of the large-scale geo-political events and changes in the structure of global power that occurred during the early decades of the 20th century suggest the critical utility of an expressly regional frame for considering the spread of 'Modernism' and its historical emergence in different locations and cultures around the world. In order to build productively upon the implications of recent work both on Euro-American modernist Orientalism and on different Asian modernisms, I want to argue for both the importance and possibilities of a 'Pacific Rim' approach to the study of Modernism, an approach that self-consciously adopts as one of its organizing principles a particular geographical region and its attendant web of historical, cultural, and other interrelationships.

A growing body of scholarship has demonstrated both the complexity and the creativity of different particular responses throughout Asia to the historical and cultural forces that helped to instigate the spread of 'Modernism' as an expressly global phe-

¹ This policy was originally promulgated in 1940 by Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke, though the idea went back much further as a means for justifying Japanese imperial conquest throughout Asia under the guise of freeing other Asian nations from domination by the West.



nomenon.² The value of this scholarship lies, at least in part, precisely in the extent to which it highlights the transformation, adaptation, and function of the very idea of 'Modernism' as it migrated and was constructed within contexts other than Europe and the US, that is, the very historical and cultural malleability of the term itself. In these works, both 'Modernism' and the 'Orient' emerge as thoroughly fluid and variable in both definition and function. 'Modernism' no longer designates a comparatively stable set of expressive or representational practices first developed in the West and then adopted more or less successfully by writers operating in other contexts and languages. Instead, it both signifies and operates differently in different historical and cultural contexts, functioning as what linguists call a 'shifter' to identify the range of cultural and intellectual responses to the advent of socio-political modernity throughout a variety of different locations. Thus, 'Modernism' becomes 'modernisms' in this regime, the seemingly insignificant orthographic change serving to promote a more global, yet also culturally, historically, and linguistically more specific conception of the term. Concomitantly, the directionality of cultural interaction flows in both directions. Asia, broadly speaking, gains History, not merely the chronology or duration of 'the Orient.' And the focus of our critical gaze moves beyond the boundaries of the West.

The conscientious development of a 'view from the Rim' entails more than simply acknowledging the fact of geography, though such a feat does amount to a necessary first step. Rather, it involves a dedicated attention to tracing the manifold historical and material relations among groups within the area and beyond along a number of different vectors, as well as attending to how these relations at once occasion and condition cultural production. For literary concerns in particular, such vectors include, but are by no means limited to, the particularities of language and various dimensions of power such as asymmetrical economic arrangements underwritten by military and political domination expressed through a variety of channels.

Such issues and methods already animate important work in Area and Ethnic Studies, as well as in the allied domain of Postcolonial Studies. And by actively engaging with developments in these comparatively recently emergent fields, Modernist Studies has the opportunity at once to open up new cultural terrain for exploration and to reinvigorate existing approaches to the established Euro-American canon. For undertaking such an engagement makes it possible to begin considering the significance of canonical Western modernist Orientalism not only in light of historical and coeval achievements in Europe and the US, but also in relation to local cultural production in different areas and languages of the Pacific Rim region. In other words, rather than continue to view them as separate, I propose that we consider these activities as tandem phenomena in order to trace the dynamics of exchange and relation between them, how the meaning of each at once interacts with and thereby modifies the other,

² See, for example, Sung-Sheng Yvonne Chang's *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan* (1993), Xiaomei Chen's *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter Discourse in Post-Mao China* (1995), Lydia Liu's *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937* (1995), Xudong Zhang's *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (1997), Shumei Shi's *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937* (2001), Andrew Jones's *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (2001), and within the field of history, Stefan Tanaka's *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (1993).

as well as how they differ in important ways as distinctive responses to contemporaneous historical events and processes.

By doing so, we allow conceptual traffic to move in multiple directions, rather than in only one way, from dominant to 'other.' Indeed, in this way Modernist Studies can even contribute to debates about contemporary culture by demonstrating the extent to which the process of 'globalization' itself has a history, one with roots in the Modernist period. Thus, we might consider such works as the classical Chinese poems written on the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Detention Center by Chinese immigrants to the US between 1910–1940 not only in relation to traditional literary achievement in Chinese, but also in light of the parallel movement of Chinese Modernism and the well-known Euro-American fascination embodied in the work of Ezra Pound, Ernest Fenollosa, Victor Segalen and others) with things Chinese at this time.³ And we might further seek to understand the relationship between such work as the Angel Island poems and the efforts of writers of the Harlem Renaissance, who also engaged with and sought ways to work against the dominant culture of the US and English literary traditions, but in markedly distinct ways. Such considerations would in turn necessitate a reassessment of the significance of canonical modernist figures like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, who each had their own conceptions of the ideal terms for establishing both a national and a distinctively 'modernist' culture. Thus, the warrant for a 'Pacific Rim' approach to the study of Modernism lies not simply in the putative reality of a geographical construction, but rather in the renewed critical productivity that it enables.

WORKS CITED

- Chang, Y. S. 1993. *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan*. Durham, NC: Duke UP.
- Chen, X. M. 1995. *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter Discourse in Post-Mao China*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Jones, A. 2001. *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age*. Berkeley: University of California P.
- Liu, L. 1995. *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Palumbo-Liu, D. 1999. *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Segalen, V. *Stèles*. trans. and annots. Billings, T. and Bush, C. (2007) Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP.
- Shi, S. M. 2001. *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937*. Berkeley: University of California P.
- Tanaka, S. 1993. *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History*. Berkeley: University of California P.
- Zhang, X. D. 1997. *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema*. Durham, NC: Duke UP.

³ Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush have recently published ground-breaking edition of Segalen's collection, *Stèles*, see Segalen, V. (2007) *Stèles*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP.