

THE INTERLINGUAL CRITIC: INTERPRETING CHINESE POETRY. By James J.Y. Liu. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. xix, 132 pp. Preface, Introduction, Epilogue, Notes, Bibliography, List of Chinese Words and Names, Index. \$17.95. (£10.77 in the U.K.; \$22.44 elsewhere.)

This volume is the latest of Professor Liu's many literary contributions, and perhaps the most complex, because it covers a wide range of subjects. As stated in its Preface, the book contains 'elements of polemics, autobiography, theory of literature, phenomenology of reading, theory of translation, hermeneutics, poetics, and practical criticism' (p. vii). Although Chinese poetry still plays an integral role in the book, the emphasis seems to be on the 'interlingual nature of the critic' who interprets and evaluates Chinese poetry for English-speaking readers.

To Liu's faithful readers, some of the material in this volume, especially in part of the Introduction and in Chapters 1, 3, and 6, has a familiar ring, since it has been published in his earlier works. However, the author assures us that this book is not 'a melange' of previously published material, but rather 'an attempt to weave various strands of thought into a coherent pattern' (p. viii). Whether or not an obviously coherent pattern can be perceived in the various strands of philosophical concepts and critical theories culled from East and West, past and present, depends on the active participation and 're-creative acumen' of the individual reader. What does emerge from these pages is the cogent and coherent voice of the author in his own role as the interlingual critic.

The Interlingual Critic, however, is not an autobiography of James J.Y. Liu, although its Introduction contains a large portion of the author's biography and intellectual and educational backgrounds. Moreover, the tone is as subjective as it is authoritative throughout the six-chapter book.

In Chapter 1, 'The Tetradic Circle,' Liu sets forth a conceptual framework for his literary theories, illustrated by a tetradic circle based on the interrelation between four elements: the world, the author, the work, and the reader. This scheme has its antecedent in his early work, Chinese Theories of Literature (1975), except that the original diagram was oval-shaped. Within this framework, Liu derives his conception of poetry, which he defines in terms of its linguistic structure and artistic function, both subject to constant interpretation and re-evaluation. For Liu believes, like the reader-oriented theorists or the phenomenologists, that a poem is not an object, but an act. A reader through the act of reading re-creates the poem, so that to read a poem is to have inter-subjective experience.

Since the goal of interlingual criticism in this volume is defined as interpretation and evaluation of Chinese poetry in English, Liu conceives four cardinal roles for the interlingual critic; namely, the critic as reader (Chapter 2), the critic as translator (Chapter 3), the critic as interpreter (Chapter 4), and the critic as arbiter (Chapter 5). His discourse, in each case, is illustrated with examples of classical Chinese poems translated by the author (accompanied with Chinese texts, Romanization, and a word-for-word translation). A bilingual scholar, well-versed in Chinese classical literature as well as Western literary criticism, Liu presents his arguments from a comparativist viewpoint based on years of research and teaching experience. Names of Western theorists and critics such as Roman Ingarden, George Poulet, Wolfgang Iser, and Paul Ricoeur frequently pop up in the process of discussion. Although Liu admits affinities between his own ideas and those of the phenomenologists, he denies any conscious or direct influence, since his own ideas stem from Chinese sources--critics who held metaphysical views. Liu is mainly interested in synthesizing literary principles from East and West and in trying to formulate common poetics and critical methodology applicable to all national literatures and to all literary genres.

The last chapter, 'A Critical Exercise,' is perhaps the most interesting part of the book. Here Liu makes practical application of his critical theories. In this demonstration of critical analysis of Chinese poetry, the author exemplifies the tetramorous function of the interlingual critic by reading, translating, interpreting, and evaluating twenty-three pieces of Chinese poetry. These poems are analyzed in terms of the interrelations between time, space, and self in a variety of combinations --to wit, 'Time, Self, and Directionality,' 'Temporal Perspectives and Spatial Images,' 'Spacialization of Time and Temporalization of Space,' and 'Transcendence of Time and Space.' His ingenious way of reading and interpreting not only enhances better understanding of and appreciation for Chinese poetry, but also manifests the aesthetic and metaphysical values of Chinese poems that transcend history and culture.

No paraphrase, however detailed, can do justice to the rich content of this book. Liu's theory and practice of translating and interpretation of Chinese poetry are basically sound and may be adopted for paradigm by other critics. A master of polemics, Liu is as provocative in his argumentation as he is provoking. The book is bound to raise controversies, because it is critical of some currently fashionable practices in translating and interpreting Chinese poetry. Personally, I delight in his stricture on those who read into Chinese poems 'wildly improbable ideas and ubiquitous Freudian symbols . . . often based on false etymology and far-fetched association of ideas,' which reveals more about 'the obsession of the interpreters than the texts they are supposed to interpret. The same is true . . . of allegorical interpretations' (p. 59). Equally laudable is his objection to the kind of 'historical relativism' which claims that there can be no validity of any kind of interpretation, since no one can really understand the past or another culture (p. 54).

An author of several scholarly books and countless articles in English, Liu has adopted an informal and lucid prose style in this volume which renders the very complex subject matter of the book comprehensible even to the less

informed. This is partly owing to his method of presentation. There seems to be a classroom situation, in which Liu provides answers in a systematic and logical step-by-step fashion. Although sometimes he tends to elaborate on the obvious, he is never dull. On the contrary, there is frequent display of witticism, of jeu de mot. For example, he describes the 'poet-translator' as a 'poet or poet manqué whose native Muse is temporarily or permanently absent and who uses translation as a way to recharge his own creative battery' (p. 37). Occasionally he turns to wisecrackery, as, for instance, when he speaks of the English-speaking readers who prefer 'their Confucius pounded, compounded and confounded . . .' (p. 52).

Notwithstanding such minor flaws, this book is indeed a valuable contribution to the fields of interlingual criticism and comparative literature. It represents a synthesis of Chinese and Western poetics and criticism as well as a synthesis of Liu's own intellectual achievements as critic, scholar, teacher, and translator.

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