

BOOK REVIEW

Jiang Zhang 张江, *The Death of the Author, or Not: An Examination of Contemporary Western Literary Theory*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2017. 500 pp.

Beginning from 2014, around the concept of “imposed interpretation” raised by Jiang Zhang of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, there has arisen in the field of Chinese literary theory a heated discussion that has been rare in the past 30 years. With “imposed interpretation”, Zhang means the type of interpretation that negates the ontological reality of literary texts and *imposes* (italics mine) on the texts subjective readings by borrowing theoretical approaches outside literature per se. It in general is a summarization of the 20th century Western literary theory, especially postmodern theories since 1970s. Almost every big name in the field has in one way or another participated in the dialogue and within a period of less than three years, more than two thousand articles have been published. Based on this phenomenal engagement in the enquiry, Professor Zhang published *The Death of the Author, or Not: An Examination of Contemporary Western Literary Theory* (《作者能不能死: 当代西方文论考辨》) in 2017, in which he gives a comprehensive and forceful explanation of his rethinking of “contemporary Western literary theory.” The history of 20th Western literary theory, as expounded in the book, is a history of “imposed interpretation” that is coercive, arbitrary and dictatorial, behind which lurks the assumption of the death of the author. The starting point of Zhang’s denouncement of Western literary theory in the 20th century is to build up a Chinese paradigm of literary criticism that can guide the development of Chinese literary practice. (3) The book begins by outlining the “theoretical problems” of contemporary Western literary theory: alienation from literary practices and experiences; bigoted and extremist interpretation of literary texts; ossification and dogmatism of certain theoretical approaches. (4-24) It is Zhang’s belief that although there had appeared a whole-hearted reception of Western literary theory in China since the 1980s, it is time to reexamine its legitimacy in the context of Chinese literature, due to the displacement between Western literary theory and Chinese culture. A Chinese literary theory that derives from Chinese literary practices, that upholds the nationalistic direction, and that adheres to the dialectical unification of the study within and without the texts, is advocated repeatedly throughout the book.

There is no making without breaking, and there is no flowing without

damming and no motion without rest, as is famously said by Han Yu, a great man of letters in Tang Dynasty of China (AD618-907). The methodology that Zhang uses to realize such a grand nationalistic goal is in accordance with Han Yu's teachings. His role is that of a doctor's, whose major role is to find the problem in the body and fix it. The symptoms of 20th century Western literary theory diagnosed by Zhang can be generally summarized as: off-site requisition, subjective presetting, illogical legislation and chaotic route of cognition, which together lead to the problem of theory's departure from literary discourse, diminishing of literary index and therefore a distortion of the meaning the text. (162) Apart from Chinese scholars' participation in this mainstream reexamination of 20th century Western literary theory, Western scholars are also invited to join in the symphony, including J. Hillis Miller, one of the leading literary critics in 20th century. In the last chapter of the book, Zhang includes four of his dialogues with Western scholars regarding his research. (405-474) Coincidentally, during the time when Hillis Miller was exchanging emails with Zhang to carry out the dialogue, the author of this book review was at Deer Isle, Miller's home in Maine, working on an interview with him. Miller was obviously not happy with Zhang's understanding of deconstruction and felt he was "trashing" the legacy of deconstruction, according to what Hillis told the author. Zhang believes in the notion of a writerly text, a definite author with a definite intention while writing. For him, New Criticism's "fallacy of intention", Barthes' "the death of the author" and Foucault's "what is the author" cuts off the relationship between the author and the text and degenerates the meaning of texts into floating signifiers. (334) However, this might be too hasty a conclusion. Arguably, the theory of "imposed interpretation" has, from the outset, been at its core an incitement to torque the suggestive and empowering treasury of theoretical inquiries, improvisations, interventions and performances toward the actuality, in several senses, of interrelated and open-ended texts of literary work. What is significant about Zhang's book is that it marks Chinese scholars' ambition in the construction of a Chinese literary theory, eager to be free from the anxieties of influence from the West. This impulse, towards a confidence in Chinese culture, seems part of the social climate and political topography that China is now presenting to the rest of the world.

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