Reflections on Rey Chow's Studies in Modern Chinese Literary Culture

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In the "overseas modern Chinese literary studies", a large number of "the third generation" overseas Chinese scholars are to be taken into consideration, among which Rey Chow (1958-) is the one who enjoys high academic recognition in the United States and the Europe, but who is one of the most contentious scholars in mainland China. Chow was born in Hong Kong, and after completing undergraduate studies at the University of Hong Kong, she got Ph. D. Degree from Stanford University in 1986, majoring in the Modern Thought and Literature. Since then, she worked successively in the University of California, the University of Minnesota, Brown University, and now Duke University. She is not only an important Chinese study scholar in America, but a major scholar in the field of cultural studies and comparative literature as well, researching on the modern and contemporary Chinese literature, Chinese films, ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, feminist studies and some other fields. As an influential scholar elucidating the post-structuralist theory, Chow's Chinese studies start from the Westernized "Chineseness", Western sinologists' gaze on China, and diasporic Chinese scholars in the Western academia,
focusing on the cultural politics in the reading of othering the others and going native
the natives. She opposes the idea to take China as a symbol embedding in the
Western symbolic system, and as a meaning source in the categories such as “the
other”, or “the native”, “the third world women”, etc. She speaks against the
diasporic intellectuals from the third world to represent their motherland as a
“cultural broker”, and even against a single paradigm of studying “Chineseness”.
Therefore, in Chow’s deconstructive studies, China’s connotation has become more
complex, and more than a particular interest for Western sinologists, just as Paul
Bowman put it, “whereas poststructuralism has tended to ab/use the idea of ‘the
East’ by figuring it as the Other of Western metaphysics in long, circuitous, and
discursive readings of aspects of ‘the west’, Chow (like Spivak) states the problem
directly.”
However, at the same time of identifying with Chow’s arguments, we
also have to pay attention to the relations between her discourses and the western
dominant statements, because when her voice achieved influence, she was no longer
in the status of “the other” or “the edge”, which expresses the typical cultural
politics as an academic phenomenon.

Rey Chow’s works involve complex texts of multiple fields and a variety of
theories. In general, two parts construct her works; the first one is the texts including
the modern Chinese literature (May 4th literature, Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly
literature), Chinese movies, city studies (Hong Kong), pop music and cartoon
strips; the other includes theories of postcolonialism, visuality, feminism, and
ethnics, and both parts are interwoven with each other, so it is hard to examine her
works as a whole. In her reading of literary and cultural texts, the most prominent
aspect is implied in the deduction and deconstruction of cultural politics, which
covers her own identity consciousness in her academic experience, and other political
levels such as reading politics, discourse politics, textual politics, gender politics
and visual politics. Therefore, her most powerful Chinese studies extend to the
domain of cultural politics, especially the four aspects of gender politics, visual
politics, identity politics and academic politics, which are of triple significance.
They are among the important fields in contemporary American issues on cultural
politics; they are typical issues in Chow’s works, as well as key problems in the focus
of “the third generation” overseas Chinese scholars. In her studies, the most
interesting aspects are her unusual way of reading and the overall look of theoretical
construction mode through the discussion of the above four aspects, and through
Chow’s discussion, the deconstruction and subversion of related issues. At the same
time, Chow is a controversial scholar. On the one hand, she arises from American academics with her style of fierce criticism and becomes "present America's most popular scholar" (Leo Ou-fan Lee);[3] on the other hand, her works are much less popular in Chinese academic circles because many Chinese scholars have criticized her of her strong ideological consciousness and cold-war thinking. They think her Hong Kong background had great influence on her academic works, and her interpretation of Chinese texts through Western theories are controversial on the aspects of propriety and rationality, although they have won the favor in the Western world. To this extent, the reception studies of Chow's works are another important aspect, and the most important parts lie in different receptions among domestic Chinese scholars, overseas Chinese scholars and Western academia. From Chow's literary and cultural image of China in her works and the criticism towards her works from mainland China, one can see an asymmetry among them, and it is necessary to interpret this academic phenomenon in American college system.

Therefore, the political study of Chow needs to be hierarchical, roughly including the following four parts. First, the cultural politics in Chow's personal experience and academic background; second, the cultural political issues in Chow's works; third, the cultural politics embodied in the reading and reception of her works; as well as fourth, the phenomenon reflected in the above three aspects. It is as the following.

Chow's academic experience, together with her reading perspectives and critical methods can draw four main issues: gender politics, visual politics, identity politics and academic politics. Chow's reference of Western theories and logical arguments can reflect her solid foundation of writing skills, but she does not focus on presenting a so-called real context of Chinese literature and films, and instead, she tries to render the detail descriptions and the expounding of theories in her reading. To be specific, she reads modern Chinese literature with "a deliberate and 'impractical' sense of complexity". [4] In the heteroglossia of modern Chinese literary studies, the charm of her reading is not in her departure from the traditional way, but in her utmost integration of resources and have a play on the basis of traditional theory. Through the study of gender, visuality, identity and academic disciplines in her works, one is not going to get about the solutions to her problems, but to focus on how she put forward those detailed and significant problems, as well as to explore the relationship between her rise in academia and the rise of American cultural studies.

The above mentioned four issues in Chow's works are: gender politics, visual
politics, identity politics and academic politics. They can be expounded as follows:

First, Chow’s discussion on gender does not cling to feminist description or the third world woman’s status, but often links with psychoanalysis and emotional details, and involves a feminine fetishism, in which femininity is an aesthetic and cultural phenomenon, because it doesn’t have to belong to a female. Thus, the women or the feminine characters in literature associate with reading politics and Chinese modernity. Second, the emergence of the technologized visuality is one of the multiple forms of modernity, and in Chow’s works, it even affected the development of Chinese culture from the beginning of last century. The visual experience makes the original landscape more dazzling and shocking, which even refers to the relationship between visuality and power. Visual power brought about by the new media such as photography and movies promotes the thinking about literature, and literature is inevitably historicized, from the record of the elite class to endorsements for ordinary people. Literature, together with visual image, is liberated from the traditional language, and it introduces mass people. In this sense, “visuality” is not only including objective presentation or dimensions perceived, but also some uncertain factors of ideology, which makes the films be read in “visual politics”.

Third, Chow had a lot of research on the formation of ethnic differences and the plight of identity, and the main emphasis is on the discussion of two concepts: “stereotype” and “coercive mimeticism”. “Stereotype” is not only a kind of cognitive psychological problem between different social groups, but also a kind of representative mechanism and a possible aesthetic and political function as well as an intervention strategy. When all ethnic groups are expected to be analogous to those as expected, and they appears in a visual state, “coercive mimeticism” is made.

Fourth, during the discussions of the academic politics, Chow writes against the third world intellectuals who live and work in the first world speaking and writing as the spokespersons for the “native”, because they are often attached to the “marginalized status” in the eyes of the white, and become diasporic cultural brokers. They can enjoy the advantageous attention when they write and speak from the position of “minority”, which just fits the Western imagination of “natives”. To Chinese diasporic intellectuals, Chow expresses her doubt about the concept of “Chineseness” as a whole without any differences.

From the “internal” research of Chow’s works in exploring the subtle and germane criticism on present theories to the “external” research of her works, one can inspect the reading and criticism of her works, which is divided into three parts.
according to geography: the Chinese scholars', overseas Chinese scholars', and European and American scholars' criticism of Chow's works. For Chinese scholars, Chow often reads Chinese texts according to her own cultural thinking, and in many times she has misunderstanding of the past and present of China. Although she criticizes "stereotype" herself, she often fixes the images of China in the period of the Republic or "Cultural Revolution". At the same time, Chinese scholars' reading of Chow is also easy to be fixed on the view of cold war and Western hegemony. On the contrary, the European and American scholars' discussion and research of Chow, and the application of Chow's theories are much more wide. [7] They have more recognition than questioning from the view of a variety of related articles, books, anthologies and theoretical references. In between there are views of overseas Chinese scholars. Therefore, the reflection of Chow's reading and criticism needs to be discussed as a separate part.

From the cultural study perspective, Chow as an academic phenomenon can be illustrated from three aspects: the personal, the institutional and cross-cultural practice. From personal aspect, Chow's cross-cultural experience is by no means the whole presence in her works, and her personal experience is not to endow her legitimacy of cross-cultural utterance and the certainty of postcolonial studies. Chow's personal experience is just as her starting point of research, and she keenly examines and analyzes a wide range of issues, such as Western theoretical problems encountering China and the Third World. Then, one may ask that if Chow is one of the products of American academic discourse of multicultural hegemony, because they want to give the title of "academic superstar" to a Third World background scholar as an appraise to embody the academic freedom. In the academic and cultural background of post-structuralism, many scholars fear that they hold insufficient attention to the popular problems such as gender, class, and ethnic, with full attention of their own discourse, which makes the ethnic scholars as Chow have the advantages. The discussion of the "edge" or the "periphery" can be attractive, and they won't be misunderstood in criticism because of the ethnic background. From the aspect of cross-cultural practice, it's not hard to see in both ends of the academic studies, overseas Chinese scholars and domestic scholars have little change to put each other in the position of the "other". If we admit that "print-capitalism" brought about the "imagined community" [8], what Chow's more than ten monographs and tens of articles in her continuing academic career conveys is far more beyond her writings themselves. To Chinese scholars, the nationalist Chinese complex leads to an
attitude that those discourse alienating China is very harsh and difficult to accept, thus it affects the entire reading of Chow’s writings; and to Western scholars, they are easier to take Chow as a member of their own camp, and also try to accept her expounds of China’s problems, no matter how poor she understands the changing China.

In conclusion, there are four aspects of Chow and her works of Chinese studies to be concerned: main issues in the field of cultural politics in Chow’s works, the politics in her own academic experience and academic focus, the politics of criticisms of Chow’s identity and works in the academic circles at home and abroad, and the cultural phenomenon reflected in the above three aspects. Besides, Chow’s ways of reading construct a supplement and challenge to the existing theories, and also pose other questions: Are there any bias against the other part and excessive uses of texts in her apparently novel and original conclusions? Will our research of Chow in the way of cultural studies ignore the complexity and simply restore it for social or political reasons? Might the discussion of a specific mode of theories be summed up and let us caught in a given theory, so as to simply label others? Will the Chinese literature and Chinese cultural issues studied from the perspective of Western theories be reduced to their footnotes? Those questions do not necessarily have a unified answer, but it’s important to discuss them from different perspectives.

Notes:
[1] Chow’s Chinese studies have cut deeply into the traditional Western sinology, because sinology “has never hesitated to emphasize its ‘national borders’, partly to avoid the charges of cultural imperialism made against its predecessors. Sinologists have adopted a relativist stance with the effect that studies of Chinese literature often foreclose relevant discussions of Western literature and theory and thereby fail to engage scholars from sister fields”. Gang Yue, “Book Reviews—Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East by Rey Chow”, Comparative Literature 47. 3 (1995): 288.

[2] Paul Bowman, ed., The Rey Chow Reader. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, p. xii.

[3] 季进：《另一种声音——海外汉学访谈录》，上海：复旦大学出版社，2011年，第52－55页。

[4] Rey Chow, Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East. Minnesota, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. xiii.
[5] Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 53 – 54.

[6] Ibid, pp. 103 – 108.

[7] The Western Chow study scholars often ignore her Chinese studies, as Bowman put, "I owned at least one book in which an essay of hers—on Chinese literature—was anthologized [...] never having has much reason or inclination to study Chinese literature [...]." Paul Bowman, *Reading Rey Chow: Visuality, Postcoloniality, Ethnicity, Sexuality*. New York: Peter Lang, 2013, p. ix.

[8] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006.

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