Anthropology and Literary Theory: Towards an Intercultural Hermeneutics

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In this essay, the subject of intercultural hermeneutics has been raised from the angle of development of anthropology and philosophical hermeneutics and the interaction of the two with a focus on the possibility, effectiveness and the limit of cultural hermeneutics. The purpose of writing is to provide an epistemological basis for literary anthropology which is now being formed, as well as to provide reference to the study of literature, transformation and development of humanities in an era of multi-culture.

1. Anthropology: from Science to Hermeneutics

The fast development of natural science in the modern era has fundamentally changed the condition of human existence and ideology, whilst it also promoted social reforms and changed the history of world civilization in a profound way. However, the unprecedented increase of human ability in understanding and controlling nature has formed a sharp contrast to the mobility in knowing itself and in handling the human life and social affairs. For only after 2,000 years since Thales had the desire to know the outer space, the footsteps of mankind have already been on other planets; but there has been little development in the approach of our understanding of human nature and social life from the time of Plato and Aristotle. In Europe, several generations of intellectuals have racked their brains in vain when trying to sum up any-
thing close to the principles of classical physics and paleontology and only brought about the controversial premature ideas, some parascientific monsters from half inference and half imagination. Therefore, it is a great pity for the humanists that no matter how talented they are, they are destined to be surpassed by any commonplace natural scientists in the sense of “scientificity”.

Is there any possibility to have a glorious scientific revolution in humanities or social science like Copernican revolution? At the time when R. G. Collingwood criticized historians that all the bad effects of their trying to copy the natural science, a young American anthropologist was trying to announce to the whole world a Copernican discovery in the field of humanity and social science: The young man was Alfred Kroeber (1876 - 1960), and his discovery was a word which has long been known to us: culture.

Anthropology as a new subject of learning to define culture in scientific terms was developed in the later part of the 19th century. Since the English anthropologist Sir Edward Tyler, the so-called “father of anthropology” gave a definition of culture in his Primitive Culture in 1871 and outlined this subject in the first chapter of the book, generations of scholars had the ambition to understand the general circumstances of human being and the regularity of evolution, in order to establish the structure of a new science to solve the problems concerning humanity in social aspect by means of studying culture.

Inspired by this, people believe that anthropology as a new science can follow the natural science and even surpass it, and find a general pattern in the cultural field so as to make it something which can be verified as natural science. This hope and ambition of the early anthropologists reflected an optimistic attitude to rationality since the Enlightenment and an enthusiasm brought to the confused humanists by Darwin’s theory of Evolution to pursue natural science.

Anthropologists of classical evolutionism all wrote voluminous
works. From the present point of view, these works have bigger influence on the modernist literature than on anthropology itself. The main reason for this is that the academic ideas of that time — to make anthropology a separate branch of science — was not commonly recognized and inherited by the later anthropologists. To them, the general rule of the evolution of culture and the way to divide the different stages seems to be the only theoretical hypothesis, which is the same as the “grand narrative” that today’s postmodernists desired to deconstruct.

The reason for this? As the American anthropologist W. Arens explains, when the general theoretical hypothesis cannot solve the practical problems, scholars’ enthusiasm in seeking laws of the grand theory is gradually fading away. “Instead, anthropologists move to the remote islands and villages and become the interpreter of the human groups who inhabited there”. The attempt to re-establish the theoretical hypothesis will come back again when there is enough explanation on special cultural groups and case studies accumulated. And this is why the structural anthropology, new evolutionism and the ecological anthropology appeared useful since the mid-20th century.

To Claude Levi-Strauss, the major figure of structural anthropology, the chief purpose of anthropology is to pursue objective knowledge, “Not simply an objectivity enabling the observer to place himself above his own personal beliefs, preferences, and prejudices, that kind of objectivity characterizes every social science. or they could not be regarded as sciences at all.” However, in the 20th century, the intention to lead anthropology to science has lost its appeal when there was a new move to make it a relative “soft science”.

Alfred Kroeber pointed out in the 20’s that it was much better to seek for a new growing point of a new science in the jointing part of the two than to merge anthropology to natural or historical sciences. Therefore, he believed that Darwin’s theory of evolution on organic
A pure Darwinian anthropology would be largely misapplied biology. One might almost as just speak of a Copernican or Newtonian anthropology. 

Another American anthropologist Clifford Geertz brought to light the idea in his article in the 60's that since the study of culture appeared as a branch of anthropology, there has been great change to the concept of man starting from the time of Enlightenment in the western thought. Since the profound integrating power of culture has been more and more clearly verified, the old idea that human beings can be studied and observed from different levels became outdated. According to Geertz, “culture is not a veneer covering people's biological nature”, and only when biology and culture began to be considered as an integrated part of a single human system can it be helpful to the understanding of human beings.

In the 70's Geertz used the term “The interpretation of Culture” for a collection of his thesis on anthropology. In the same book he also raised the question whether anthropology is science. This attracted the attention of anthropologists and the whole field of social sciences. Geertz believed that the concept of culture was in essence a semiotic one:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

The key question in the interpretation of culture is the rationalization of intercultural understanding: whether the native tribal culture it should be analysed with the theory of western science or from the internal side of the tribal culture itself? Geertz preferred the second one. Thus made the difference in epistemology appear to be a series of an-
The fact that large numbers of anthropologists agreed with Geertz's viewpoint brought about a turning point to the discipline. A new branch formed in the 80's was called "Anthropological Poetics" in the field of American anthropology. It paid close attention to the subjective part of culture and led literature and aesthetic means into study and expression of anthropology, and also, in the field of literary criticism appeared new theory and new trend such as new historicism, cultural studies and imagology which were very much influenced by cultural hermeneutics. The leading exponent of new historicism Greenblatt wrote when explaining his Poetics of Culture; I try to practice a more cultural or anthropological criticism, that means close to Geertz's way of interpretive studies of culture.

The construct of cultural poetics implies that cultural relativism, an ideal gift prepared for the globalization by cultural anthropology in this century, has been accepted in literary studies. Philip K. Bock pointed out brilliantly in the preface of his book Cultural Shock:

Given the fact that cultural shock is always disconcerting and often unpleasant, why in the world should anyone seek out this type of experience? The answer to this question was suggested in the first paragraph: direct confrontation with another society is the best way to learn about alien modes of life or to gain perspective on one's own culture. This is why one or more years of "field work" is expected to be part of the training of every cultural anthropologist.

Inspired by this, literary critics and historians started to change the "narrowly partisan" mode, seeking for a dialogue between different cultures in humanity study became an important source of academic development. The following saying by Fredric Jameson shows an inspiration in the practice of intercultural interpretation, "To study a certain
culture, it should be prepared by the idea which surpasses the culture itself." A famous Chinese verse can also be used to explain this, "The reason one cannot tell the true shape of the mountain is because he himself is in the mountain."

Anthropology moved from science to hermeneutics, which means that it was no longer in blindly conformity with the law and the aim of natural sciences nor simply pursue the general and objective knowledge, but changed to the understanding of the meaning of human life. Theoretically, phenomenology and hermeneutics have successfully shown that the object of scientific study is not the stipulated real world, but a world of non-substance established on a basis full of cultural colours, therefore, "all the science is humanity", as Heidegger put it.

It is only a wishful thinking to have anything close to purity of objectivity without any foresight of value. In fact, contemporary anthropologists are no longer satisfied with keeping an objective viewpoint with the given cultural phenomenon, so they set up a new aim which is "anthropology as cultural critique", and soon accepted recognition in the field of cultural studies. To take the moral responsibility of cultural critique, anthropology must have the general moral norms recognized by different cultural subjects, and appeal to certain universal standpoints.

In face of this problem, to expand the theoretical boundary of hermeneutics is a possible choice to meet the demand of cross-cultural understanding.

2. Hermeneutics: from Intersubjectivity to Interculturality

On the aspect of knowledge formation, we may see that the new trend in anthropological study is that Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics have been accepted. This also suggests the possibility for hermeneutics to move to cultural
hermeneutics. Both Heidegger and Gadamer actually discussed the question of dialogue between the text and its comprehender in the same historical cultural context, and the rightfulness of hermeneutic circle and preunderstanding on the basis of a self-evident view that the text and its comprehender are both within the same historical existence. Therefore they arrived at the fundamental proposition that “all comprehension is the comprehension of oneself”. Heidegger and Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory contented anthropology’s demand for new knowledge formation, yet it fell into a new difficult position in ethical aspect at the same time.

To anthropologists, this dilemma is fundamentally new form of the opposition of universalism and relativism, in which universalism kept the critical ethical solicitude but cannot erase the stand of cultural imperialism, whereas relativism has ridded of the cultural imperialism standpoint but again went to the dead end of determinism and dictatorialism in knowledge formation. In practical usage, for lack of critical ethical solicitude, it becomes cultural rhetorics of regional centralism.

Actually, the opposite of relativism is absolutism instead of universalism, therefore, relativism and universalism are not against each other in the field of cultural studies. On the contrary, the problem that cultural relativism reveals in practice shows that without universalism as a necessary restrict and complement, relativism will go to extreme and develop into a different form of absolutism.

Dutch scholar E. Kunneibsch generalized that the problems of cultural relativism are mainly in the following three aspects:

1. the relativism of a given cultural pattern.
2. The gulf between different paradigms of interpretation leads to barrier mutual understanding.
3. If we agree with multilateral value, that will lead to the idea that the behavior which offend others is acceptable.

It is not difficult to see that the three aspects basically are inte-
Comparative Literature: East & West

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Gratified, that they all affirmed the decisive force of a certain culture which acted on the cultural subject within it. Therefore, people cannot annotate anything from a different culture so that the soleness and absolute effectiveness of self interpretation is assured. In this way, relativism goes to its opposite when superficially has the correct viewpoint that every culture has nothing more than its relative significance and value which can only be evaluated from the system of value it subordinated, but not be criticized from the external position, so it has its absolutism and soleness in this particular historical – regional range.

Examining the defects of relativism, we think that only by giving necessary limitation and orientation from the universalist point of view can we assure the positive affect and rationalization of relativism.

3. Literary Anthropology: Towards an Intercultural Hermeneutics

Following the “world literature” of the 19th century and the “general literature” in the beginning of the 20th century, the coming of the cultural dialogue in the time of post-colonialism brought a new goal in the theoretical field for the scholars of comparative literature, which is the literary anthropology. Therefore, the study of literature itself has a new mission which is to explore the anthropological value of literature and art to speed up the re-conformity of literary experiences of mankind as a whole. The world-wide conformity of literary experiences will initiate the practice to break up the boundary of different nations and countries in order to form the best way to educate the international citizens with world-wide knowledge and value system of globalisation.

There is a long way to go before the establishment of literary anthropology, for it has to await the conformity and assimilation of the cultural and literary experiences of different nations. Due to the domi-
nation of different types of chauvinism, nationalism and power discourse, the present literary criticism and literary history are full of historical prejudice and cultural blind spots, and there exists in the so-called territory of world literature a big area of uncommunication which is still under depression. With the help of the study of anthropology, post-structuralism and post-modernism, for the first time the frontier voices and words of non-mainstream have been taken seriously. The multiculturalism from the limited to real pluralism, and the acceptance of equality and democracy in the literary discourse can be only made possible after a series of tests by different arguments, so as to open the gate for the conception of literary anthropology. This process has provided spacious room for the reinterpretation of every native tradition of literature.

In his works *Validity in Interpretation* E. D. Hirsch pointed out that the function of plasticity in interpretation is more obvious when an explanation cannot continue and has to be revised. When any totally unexpected words, expression or pattern appear, the interpreter either revise himself and all the ideas he has so far and accept a new different pattern, or he will come to this conclusion that he does not really understand the meaning of this new pattern. China has his own hermeneutic tradition which is difficult to continue in the tread of cultural exchange and social changes of the 20th century, and has to be revised. When the theory and interpretive method of western humanity, as a “totally unexpected words or expression pattern”, have put in front of us a series of untraditional model, it is unavoidable that we must choose from the two possible choices mentioned above.

From the viewpoint of universalism, relativism is conditional, temporary and limited. Cultural relativity means that no culture has a fixed internal substance, so it is not a “single and confined individual, but a symbol system in continuous change,” therefore, it can only exists in a form which develops from a continuous interpretation to un-
limited possible future. From this sense, no culture is essentially pure and self-satisfied, and not authorized to refuse “re-interpreted” and “re-evaluated”. Heidegger and Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory has made this point common sense in humanity. On the other hand, to accept the universalism based on anthropology means that in every culture, at the time when self-interpretation is accepted, the rationalization and validity of the interpretation from cultural others based on unlimited communication ought to be accepted as well.

People in a particular cultural tradition can surely obtain new cultural elements from another culture, enrich and expand their visual world, and to include elements of cultural others in their understanding, especially today when cross-cultural communication becomes so convenient and means to obtain information so diversified, the cultural determinism which requires a clear distinction between oneself and others is not convincing any more. Even Edward Said, who was once strongly for the cultural determinist view, has to admit that culture is not a question of decision, or a question of borrowing and lending with a definite debit side and a credit side, but rather depend on each other and an exchange of experiences of different cultures.

As for the different cultural forms, all of them have overlapping part with others, this is the starting point to surpass self-limitation and exchange with the others. None of the culture has a fixed internal substance, and the real self of each culture is depending on cultural others. Based on this, the intercultural understanding uses the known part of one culture to name the dissident part of others, thus evolves the self comprehension of culture, for the part one uses to understand and name the is others becomes part of itself. In this sense, the comprehending of others is actually a continuing expansion of oneself.

However, as we verified repeatedly, the intercultural comprehension assured by the universalism of anthropology in actuality is based on the commonplace of different cultures. Therefore, it is self comprehen-
sion based on reference of other cultures, not the real comprehension of dissident cultures.

Although the relativism of these two different levels have the aspects of mutual supplement and mutual employment, the division itself shows that each of the two has its own effective range, and they can neither exceed its restriction, nor substitute one another. Here finiteness and effectiveness are connected. As we pointed out, when relativism of the first level and its demand enters the second level, the rationalization develops into self-expansion of cultural imperialism. For the same reason, when cultural relativity and non-comprehensibility between cultures it request breaks away from the restriction of self-expansion of culture, and make this non-comprehensibility the cause of denying self-reinterpretation from the angle of cultural others, the self comprehension could become autocracy which depresses dissident elements within its own culture.

In face of the theoretical obstacles in cultural dialogue and regional autocracy brought by the expansion of cultural relativism of present time, it is important for the development of intercultural hermeneutics and the establishment of literary anthropology to restore the authority and rationalization of universalism which has long been discarded due to misunderstanding.

Notes:
① R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*. Chinese trans. by He Zhaowu, China Social Science Press, Beijing, 1987, p. 207.
② Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*. translated into English by C. Jacobson, Basic Books, Inc., New York, 1963, pp. 363-364.
③ C. Geertz, *The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man*. D. W. McCurdy et al. ed., *Issues in Cultural Anthropology*. Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1979, p. 35.
④ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*. Basic Books, New York, 1973, p. 5.
⑤ C. Geertz, *From the Native Point of View*. L. Dolgin et al. ed., *Symbolic
Comparative Literature: East & West

Anthropology, Columbia University Press, New York, 1977, p.481.

6 Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self - Fashioning. Chinese trans. by Zhao Yifan, World Literary Theory [1], Social Science Press, Beijing, 1993, p.79.

7 P. K. Bock ed., Culture Shock: A Reader in Modern Cultural Anthropology. Alfred A. Knof, New York, 1970, pp.x - xi.

8 M. Heidegger, Existence And Time. Chinese trans. by Chen Jiaying, Sanlian Shudian, Beijing, 1987, p.63.

9 G. E. Marcus & M. M. Fisher, Anthropology as Cultural Critique. University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.111.

10 E. D. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation. Chinese translation by Wang Caiyong, Sanlian Shudian, Beijing, 1991, p.84.

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