The Chinese Renaissance: A Transcultural Reading

GANG ZHOU

"TO EACH EYE, PERHAPS, THE OUTLINES OF A GIVEN CIVILIZATION PRESENT a different picture. . . ." Thus writes Jacob Burckhardt at the beginning of his influential work *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. With these words, Burckhardt not only prepares his reader for the uniqueness of his vision of the Italian Renaissance but also negotiates a space for various kinds of interpretation to come. This paper examines the ways in which the idea of renaissance was understood and appropriated by Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century. My discussion foregrounds Hu Shi, one of the most important intellectual leaders in modern China and the main architect of the Chinese vernacular movement. Appropriating the linguistic shift that took place in the European Renaissance, Hu formed a brilliant narrative that facilitated the transformation of the vernacular in China from a vulgar tongue into the language of the nation and the language of the future. His creative uses of the Italian Renaissance and his passionate promotion of a Chinese Renaissance reveal the performative magic of the word *renaissance* and prompt us to ask what a renaissance is. The Chinese Renaissance and the fact that various non-European countries have declared and promoted their own renaissances invite a scholarly reconsideration of renaissance as a transcultural phenomenon rather than as a critical category originated and therefore owned by a certain culture. As Edward Said comments, "Culture is never a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures" (*Culture* 217).

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The Renaissance: A Small Book

In June 1917, on his return trip to China from the United States, Hu Shi, who would soon become a major player in the Chinese literary

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scene, read a small book entitled *The Renaissance*, by Edith Sichel. Sichel's book, priced as low as a dollar, was commissioned for the Home University Library and was intended to educate a mass audience. Ever since the Italian artist and writer Vasari coined the word *renaissance* (*rinascita*) to describe what he saw as a rebirth of arts in his era, his time has been named a renaissance, and the period has attracted intellectual and scholarly appraisal. Sichel was an academic, and her approach to the Renaissance is a product of centuries of knowledge transmission among elite thinkers, but her book targets the general public and is a good example of how ideas emerge from the academy and penetrate society.[1] When Hu encounters Sichel's book, however, the text meets a reader perhaps unanticipated by its producers. The meeting creates a "contact zone," a space where people geographically and culturally separated come into contact with each other and engage in meaning making.[2] What happened to the notion of renaissance in this contact zone—what did the term gain or lose? If the new possibilities of interpretation made the concept vulnerable, does this vulnerability also reveal the vitality of the idea itself?

Hu spent 1910 to 1917 as a student in the United States. He received his bachelor's degree in philosophy from Cornell University in 1914 and then studied at Columbia University under the guidance of John Dewey. His understanding of renaissance would undoubtedly have been influenced by his years of formal education in the United States and by intimate and lively contact with American ideas and institutions. Although it is impossible to reconstruct the hermeneutic process by which Hu took in information, we can trace perceptions of the European Renaissance in scholarship and in the American popular imagination at the time, both generally dominated by the Burckhardtian tradition. Peter Burke synthesizes Burckhardt's contribution to the popular and academic view of the Renaissance thus: "with [Burckhardt] posterity associates the definition of the Renaissance in terms of the development of the individual and the discovery of the world and of man, and this is a fair verdict in the sense that it was [Burckhardt] who organized his whole essay around these ideas (together with that of 'modernity') rather than around the more conventional concept of the revival of antiquity" (12). In other words, Burckhardt brought about a paradigm shift and reshaped the conception of the Renaissance in Europe. While renaissance had once been confined to a rebirth of arts or of letters, Burckhardt broadened the notion by adding to it what he regarded as the essence of the period: individualism and the discovery of the world and of humanity.[3] There is no evidence that Hu read Burckhardt during his years of study in the United States, but it is fairly safe to say that he would have received the Burckhardtian model by way of lectures and related reading. So, how does the Burckhardtian model play into Hu's reading of Sichel? One might expect individualism and modernity to predominate Hu's understanding of renaissance, but as we shall see, Hu perceived the vernacular movement to be the major feature of the European Renaissance and the strongest basis for his invention of the Chinese Renaissance.

Let us take a close look at Sichel's small book *The Renaissance*. Overall, the work follows the mainstream thought of the time, painting a Burckhardtian Renaissance slightly altered by John Addington Symonds's version. In fact, Symonds's *The Renaissance in Italy* is listed at the top of the recommended works on the back of Sichel's book. Symonds presented the Renaissance as an age of sharp contrasts, of highlights and deep shadows. He also termed the Renaissance "the emancipation of the reason of the modern world," a claim Burckhardt would have hesitated to make (W. Ferguson). Perhaps to make the Renaissance more visual and more graspable, Sichel's book opens with Michelangelo's great

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painting of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The fresh image of Adam, "with a body naked and unashamed, and a strong arm, unimpaired by fasting, outstretched towards life and light," presents to the reader a dramatic and even exaggerated picture of youth and emancipation. Sichel then argues that "two main things there were which the Renaissance of Western Europe signified: it signified Emancipation and Expression" (8). While Burckhardt pays great attention to the artistic expression, Sichel departs from him in emphasizing what she calls "a perfect passion for language." Following the humanistic interpretative tradition, Sichel's "passion for language" is nearly synonymous with "passion for the re-discovery of the classics, and for the unearthing of manuscripts." Only at the end of her account of this passion does she mention the vulgar tongue, "the growth of national speech and its gradual encroachment upon Latin" (13). However, it was this story of emerging vernaculars that captured Hu's imagination. As Hu wrote in his diary on 19 June 1917, "[W]e can see from Sichel's book that the national languages in Renaissance Europe all started as very small forces but ended up having wide-reaching and powerful influences. Hence, we who advocate vernacular literature today ought to be confident about a promising future" (*Hu Shi* 4: 1155; my trans.). The problem of *volgare* was never highlighted by Burckhardt, and neither was it Sichel's emphasis. But for Hu, who for years had been occupied with the question of language reform in China, the rise of vernacular languages became the episode that shone in the grand drama of the European Renaissance.

Renaissance: Translation and Transculturation

Hu was not the only one in modern China passionate for the Renaissance. Irene Eber in "Thoughts on Renaissance in Modern China: Problems of Definition" discusses how the term *renaissance* was understood and interpreted by Chinese intellectuals from the late Qing period and the May Fourth period. Eber observes that earlier the notion of renaissance was loosely defined and that frequently flowery metaphors were used in place of actual analysis. Only after the May Fourth Movement in 1919 did the notion begin to crystallize, but there was still no agreement on its meaning. "Indeed, there was a variety of ideas: renaissance was free thinking and inquiry; renaissance was change in people's attitude; renaissance was overthrow of medievalism; and renaissance was new language and literature" (216). Eber's picture shows the volatility of the term as it moved across linguistic and cultural borders. As if opened up by the new circumstances, new needs, and new interests, *renaissance* suddenly multiplied, attracting new meanings and shedding old ones. The translations of the term tell a story of transculturation.[4]

When *renaissance* first appeared in modern Chinese discourse, a number of almost identical phrases were used to translate the term, including *wenyi fuxing shidai*, *wenyi fuxing*, *guxue fuxing*, *wenxue fugu*, and *wenxue fuxing*. For instance, in his writing in 1904, the reformer Liang Qichao likens late Qing scholarship to the Renaissance in Europe. He goes on to say, "It is like a growing organism that has now reached its blossom, with a flourishing air of early spring. Hence I hold boundless hope for the future of our scholarship" (103). His use of *renaissance* is metaphoric, as was that of Vasari when he chose the term to describe the booming scene of fine arts in Italy. Liang uses *guxue fuxing* (restoration of antiquity) as the Chinese equivalent of *renaissance*, making no distinction between the European Renaissance and restoration of antiquity. Zhang Taiyan, another important thinker in the late Qing period, also emphasizes restoration of antiquity in his translation of the concept: he uses *wenxue fugu* (revival of antiquity in

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literature), *wenxue fuxing* (restoration of antiquity in literature), and *guxue fuxing* (restoration of antiquity) interchangeably in his rhetoric of the Renaissance. In a speech given in 1906 at a welcome party organized by Chinese oversea students in Tokyo, Zhang pairs the revival of Han learning with the restoration of antiquity that took place in the European Renaissance. He states, "If the revival of Han learning can match what took place in the age of the revival of antiquity in literature [*wenxue fugu de shihou*], such a movement will certainly have the power to preserve the nation and the Han Chinese" (qtd. in Chen Pingyuan 336). Here we actually see *renaissance* find its equivalent in spoken Chinese.

Both Liang and Zhang use *fuxing* (restoration) and *fugu* (the restoration of antiquity) in their representation of the Renaissance. In classical Chinese, *fuxing* means the restoration of something—a political order, a custom, a practice—fallen into disuse. Zhang's increasing interest in the European Renaissance was closely tied to his anti-Manchurian revolutionary cause, which championed returning to "authentically Chinese" culture and reviving Han learning. Similarly, Liang's use of *renaissance* in relation to the Qing scholarship implied that Qing scholars had a vital role in reviving the past and infusing it with new life for the present. For both, the European Renaissance by way of its Chinese translations, *fuxing* and *fugu*, provided a perfect model that looked to the future but at the same time harked back to the past, to an essential Chinese culture.

A considerable amount of resistance to the terms *fuxing* and *fugu* is visible in later-generation intellectuals, many of whom sought a better phrase to capture their understanding of renaissance. Hu noted in his diary that the title of Sichel's book *The Renaissance* should be translated as *zaisheng shidai* (the age of rebirth). He considered *wenyi fuxing* the Chinese equivalent of "a revival of literature and art" (*Hu Shi* 4: 1155). By differentiating the Renaissance period and the revival of literature and art, Hu successfully debunked the equation that had been established in the late Qing discourse of the Renaissance. In other words, according to Hu a revival of literature and art does not equal a Renaissance. The European Renaissance is an age of rebirth, the beginning of the use of vernacular literature, which was reborn during that period. Thus what a renaissance is and what is to be revived received a new definition in Hu's rhetoric: if anything is to be reborn, it is the vernacular, something far different from the essence of Chinese culture as perceived by Liang and Zhang.

Other May Fourth thinkers preferred a more future-oriented word for the Chinese equivalent of *renaissance*. *Xinchao*, the Beijing University student magazine, began its publication in the winter of 1918, and *The Renaissance* was its English subtitle. Fu Sinian, one of the main editors, claimed unhesitatingly that *xinchao* (new tide) and *renaissance* were exact translations of each other. For Fu and others, the Renaissance was a return to freethinking and inquiry. The essence of the term *renaissance* was therefore not the mere revival of antiquity but rather *xinchan* (new birth), *xinchao* (new tide) by way of free thought. From restoration of antiquity to the age of rebirth and finally to new birth and new tide, *renaissance* moved further and further away from its original connection with antiquity and transformed into a symbol of newness and progress.

A renaissance as a period of liberation, a period when individuals are freed from the bondage of tradition, echoed perfectly the iconoclastic spirit of the New Culture movement. In June 1919, an article spoke of the European Renaissance as an "emancipating movement" and pronounced the May Fourth Movement a first step in this direction: "We are going to change our attitude towards life and bring about a Chinese Renaissance, emancipating emotions, emancipating thought, and

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demanding human rights" (qtd. in Chow 338). The author's assertion is made purely through analogy. Although what lies behind the analogy is unclear, the compelling and exciting sound of the rhetoric is perhaps what makes the idea of renaissance so readily adopted. Renaissance was a foreign term and concept not merely acquired by Chinese intellectuals but also substantially revised and reimagined to serve different purposes. Those who transformed it engaged in the exact kind of practice of doing things with words that *transculturation* describes.[5]

As the above discussion illustrates, the search for the right Chinese word to translate *renaissance* was always accompanied by a group's or a cause's claim to be creating the Chinese counterpart of the European Renaissance. The connection between the European Renaissance and the May Fourth literary revolution was consciously cultivated by May Fourth intellectuals from the beginning. The two articles that launched the May Fourth literary revolution in 1917 used the European Renaissance as a reference point to discuss the contemporary Chinese literary and cultural scene. While Hu's "Some Modest Suggestions for Literary Reform" ("Wenxue gailiang chuyi") drew on the linguistic transition that took place in the European Renaissance, Chen Duxiu's "On Literary Revolution" ("Wenxue geming lun") emphasized the overall importance of the Renaissance period in the history of European civilization. Both declared that the literary revolution they called for paralleled the European Renaissance and marked the starting point of a new nation, a new China that someday would be as awe-inspiring and brilliant as its European counterparts.

A decade later, when writings of May Fourth intellectuals were canonized and institutionalized, the similarity between the May Fourth literary revolution and the European Renaissance was again consciously emphasized. By then, *wenyi fuxing* (a revival of literature and art) had already become the standard Chinese equivalent of *renaissance*. Late Qing political reformers might have been happy that the word they chose remained in currency, but they would certainly have been unhappy about what the term denoted in the new context. Restoration of antiquity was not in the picture: *wenyi fuxing* became an emblem of new birth and of many forward-looking features of modernity and progress. It was with this utopian definition, not the definition used by late Qing reformers, that May Fourth intellectuals reflected on their achievements in the first ten years. Their recapitulation was published in the 1930s as the *Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature*, a ten-volume anthology of critical theory, literary debates, fiction, poetry, familiar essays, and drama produced between 1917 and 1927 (Zhao, *Zhongguo*). The following paragraph opens the preface of the *Compendium*:

> It has been almost two decades since the birth of the May Fourth literary movement, initiated in the 1917 *New Youth* magazine by Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu in Beijing. Compared to a four-thousand-year history of literature, two decades seem brief and not worthy of consideration. But in evaluating their significance for the future of Chinese culture, we realize the New Literature movement is just like the European Renaissance, ushering in a brand new age. Although what the movement brought to the world may not be so miraculous and spectacular as what the European Renaissance produced, the adventurous spirit of these pioneers has provided a great model for our new youth, and the literary works they have created are immeasurable treasures in the history of the New Literature.
>
> (Zhao, Preface; my trans.)

While the *Compendium* authoritatively defines the New Literature through inclusion and exclusion, the preface defines the ways the New Literature should be read and interpreted through association. Readers are taught to connect the European Renaissance and the May Fourth literary movement at the

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beginning of their reading and understanding. Here the term *renaissance* is not merely a neologism that signifies some foreign period in a foreign culture but rather a reinvented critical category used to legitimize and glorify certain literary values and practices.

The *Chinese* Renaissance: Two Important Essays

Transculturation goes beyond translation, and thus the term *renaissance* not only operates in a translingual context but also performs in various concrete processes of verbal communication. In other words, the individual thinkers who encountered *renaissance* constitute only part of the story. The discussion about the reception of *renaissance* in the context of modern China must include some contact zones that can only be delineated by the intriguing negotiation among addresser, addressee, and the historical situation. The "hero" is thus a relation or an interaction, rather than an individual who used the term *renaissance* in certain ways. Two of Hu Shi's essays, each written at a critical moment in the May Fourth literary revolution, provide points of departure to examine the middle ground where we may locate the reception of renaissance at a particular moment in modern China.

The essay "Some Modest Suggestions for Literary Reform" marked the first time Hu championed vernacular literature in China as canonical. For almost two millennia China had maintained two written languages; classical Chinese was the prestigious literary language, and the vernacular was the medium for popular genres such as fiction and drama.[6] Vernacular literature was always kept outside the literary canon, but by the end of the nineteenth century, the language structure in China had been shaken. The development of modern print culture promoted the use of the vernacular in journalism and various other fields, challenging the previous monopoly of classical Chinese. Seeing the power of the vernacular to convey ideas and to influence people, late Qing political reformers enthusiastically promoted the change.[7] But even during this period, the conventional idea of language remained intact. The vernacular was still conceived as a vulgar tongue for uneducated masses, while the great literary tradition was reserved for works written in classical Chinese. Hu's essay was among the first attempts to bring dignity and literary importance to the vernacular. Ironically, Hu composed his essay in classical Chinese, the very language that he sought to overthrow.

That the essay was written in classical Chinese was by no means surprising since the classical language was still the common linguistic vehicle among literati. Even a progressive journal like *New Youth* would have to wait another year and a half to start publishing literary works written in the vernacular. Hu's essay discussed a serious matter and was aimed at well-educated intellectuals interested in literary reform: it was to them that Hu made his plea. The essay revolves around eight tenets: (1) writing should have substance; (2) do not imitate the ancients; (3) pay attention to grammar; (4) do not moan without an illness; (5) eliminate hackneyed and formulaic language; (6) do not use allusions; (7) avoid parallelism; (8) do not avoid vulgar diction. These points were later termed the "eight *don'ts*" and commonly cited as the most important principles of the May Fourth literary revolution.[8]

The significance of Hu's essay and the linguistic shaky ground that it embodies remind us of Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, which, similarly, was composed in Latin, the classical language, and yet aimed to elevate the Florentine vernacular. In fact, near the end of his essay when explaining the last of his eight *don'ts*—do not avoid vulgar diction—Hu offers Dante as a model for his countrymen. Recapitulating the development of Chinese literature, Hu argues that at the end of the Yuan dynasty Chinese literature came close

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to a union of spoken and written language and that the vernacular nearly became a literary language. "If this tendency had not been arrested, then a 'living literature' might have appeared in China and the great endeavor of Dante and Luther might have developed in old Cathay." To further clarify, Hu writes a long paragraph on the linguistic transition in the European Renaissance. Interestingly, the paragraph is in parentheses:

> (In the Middle Ages in Europe, each country had its own vulgar spoken language and Latin was the literary language. All written works used Latin, just as classical Chinese was used in China. Later, in Italy appeared Dante and other literary giants who first used their own vulgar language to write. Other countries followed suit, and national languages began to replace Latin. . . . Hence, all contemporary literature in the various European nations developed from the vulgar languages of the time. The rise of literary giants began with a "living literature" replacing a dead literature in Latin. . . .) (Denton 138)

Here Hu connects his cause of language reform with the European Renaissance. He implies that Europeans have set the example and that now it is time for China to follow suit—that in this universal path of progress, it is China's turn to march forward. In a way, it is only appropriate that a person like Hu, someone well versed in Chinese and European literary history, raise such a point. After negotiating back and forth with Chinese literary tradition and its scholarship (Hu cites an amazing number of traditional Chinese poets and works in this revolutionary piece), he distinguishes himself clearly as someone with access to foreign literary traditions. He places the paragraph in parentheses; if there is a center and periphery in this essay, the European Renaissance is at the periphery, while the grand Chinese literary tradition occupies the center. *Renaissance* in this context is a word of low profile, a word of periphery but also a word of subversion, of revolution. The author seems aware that some of his readers will be made uneasy by the association, some will be excited and will welcome it, some will be ambivalent, and some might feel the analogy completely out of place. But it is precisely in that unknown area, the territory where the authorial intention is tested, welcomed, defied, or revised that we locate the real reception of renaissance. Here we see the modest debut of renaissance on the May Fourth literary scene.

The second essay, "Toward a Constructive Theory of Literary Revolution" ("Jianshe de wenxue geming lun"), was published in April 1918, when the May Fourth literary revolution advanced to a new stage, the stage of construction. A number of things should be noted before we examine this text. First, the essay is written in the vernacular. To put its call for literary revolution into action, *New Youth* started to publish serious creative works and theoretical articles written in the vernacular, Hu's essay among them. Second, the essay was written as a systematic and constructive theoretical guideline for the vernacular movement. By then, Hu was a professor at Beijing University—the most prominent university in China—and was acknowledged as the most respected theorist in the circle of *New Youth*. The tone of the essay shows that the author was confident he would be treated seriously and embraced enthusiastically by the progressive youth. Third, the essay conveys a strong sense of being a "maker"—the maker of the national language, the maker of a living literature, and ultimately the maker of a new, resurrected China. The author seems intoxicated with the significance of the movement and the future it will bring to China, and he tells the reader about the differences that "we who promote the vernacular" can make in this exciting historical moment.

The essay begins with a preamble in which Hu repeats his famous eight *don't*s and then says he intends to continue with more-positive thoughts. He writes, "I hope that we who advocate the literary revolution will exert

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our energies constructively, so that in the next thirty or fifty years we may create for China a school of new Chinese living literature." But how to create a living literature? Hu coins a slogan: "a literature in the national language; a literary national language" (127–28; my trans.). The main argument in his second section is that a living literature has to be written in a living language, which is the vernacular. In the third section, he talks about how to create a national language, and here he repeats his story of the rise of national languages in the European Renaissance. This time the European Renaissance is placed at the center of the essay, as a powerful model to be emulated. The story is provided with more detail, and the author is now confident about the symbolic value the model embodies. But the way he relates to the model he draws on becomes problematic.

Hu first claims that his argument is the result of many years' study of the history of European languages. Having established himself as an expert on the subject, he uses Italy and England as two main examples and stresses that the history of the Italian national language is especially instructive for China's current movement. According to Hu, Italy was the first country to enthrone the vernacular as the national language, and Dante was the first great master who elevated the Italian language to replace Latin. After Dante, Boccaccio and others also wrote literary works in the vernacular, and in less than a hundred years, the national language of Italy was firmly established. What is particularly striking here is the readiness Hu sees in his Italian model. A more factual account would show that it took much longer for the Florentine vernacular that Dante promoted to replace Latin as the dominant written language in Italy. During this long transition, the relation between the classical language and the vernacular was complicated.[9] I imagine it is Hu's wish for a sweeping victory of the vernacular language over classical Chinese that underlies his oversimplified narrative of the Italian literary scene. His assessment of the linguistic shift in the Italian Renaissance says more about his vision of Chinese literature than it does about its Italian model.

Hu's misrepresentation of the Renaissance narrative can also be seen in the negativity projected onto Dante's attitude toward Latin. Hu's Dante sees Latin as dead and the vernacular as surpassing Latin in its beauty. It does not seem to have occurred to Hu that, although Dante's promotion of the vernacular eventually led to its replacement of Latin, Dante would never have condemned Latin as a dead language in the way Hu and his fellow May Fourth writers condemned classical Chinese. Dante had great reverence for Latin and the Latin literary tradition. It is Vergil, after all, who is chosen by Dante as the great mentor to guide the pilgrim through the journey in *Inferno* and *Purgatory*. On the other hand, one is surprised that Dante says so little about the Latin language in his famous defense of the vernacular, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*: instead of denigrating Latin, he separates the vernacular from Latin (the artificial language), building up the vernacular as a new authority, which ultimately counterbalances the old authority. In contrast, for Hu and his generation of intellectuals, the only way to establish the power of the vernacular was to dethrone and destroy classical Chinese. Hu's reinvention of Dante as an anti-Latin hero therefore created a more fitting example for the Chinese vernacular movement, which could now be seen as following a respected, universal model.

So how shall we address the significance of the concept of renaissance in this verbal instance? First, from its low-profile debut to this glorious staging, the European Renaissance was firmly established as a model for the Chinese vernacular movement. Hu's position and intellectual influence, along with the symbolic value that was accorded any idea from the West, made *renaissance* an indispensable term. At the same time, the Renaissance narrative further consolidated Hu's role

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as a great visionary leader and reaffirmed the vernacular movement as a grand project in pursuit of modernity and progress. Later May Fourth discussions of language, produced by participants such as Fu Sinian and Luo Jialun, readily accepted the analogy, and it was also adopted to guide the reader through the *Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature* in the 1930s. Second, as we saw in "Some Modest Suggestions for Literary Reform" and "Toward a Constructive Theory of Literary Revolution," it is not a dictionary definition that tells us what a word signifies in a concrete historical verbal interaction but the social tone of a word as well as the contact zone a word indicates. V. N. Volosinov describes the phenomenon thus: "in point of fact, word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee. . . . A word is a territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor" (52–53). The reception of *renaissance* in modern China may well be reconsidered in this sense.

The Chinese Renaissance: A Haskell Lecture Series

One might be amazed to see how the Renaissance was domesticated to serve local Chinese interests, but one will be even more amazed to see how the idea of renaissance was further defamiliarized when it was brought back to the United States by Hu in the 1930s.[10] In July 1933, Hu was invited as the Haskell lecturer to give a series of talks at the University of Chicago. The original title of the series was "Cultural Trends in Present-Day China." When the lectures were put together and published later as a volume, it was called *The Chinese Renaissance*. Because English is its linguistic medium, the book has been largely neglected by Chinese scholars. But, in my view, it provides us with a perfect case study to examine how renaissance geographically travels back and forth but semantically moves further away from what it originally meant.

The Chinese Renaissance embodies an intricate contact zone. Its anticipated addressee is an English speaker who seeks understanding about China, and Hu, the addresser, speaks for China as someone who knows the subject well and who is also a major player in an important historical drama. The foreword of the book, by A. Eustace Haydon, head of the Department of Comparative Religion at the University of Chicago, describes a well-defined author-reader relationship. Haydon presents Hu as the perfect Haskell lecturer: "Both as an interpreter of China's cultural renaissance and as an ambassador of interracial and intercultural understanding Professor Hu was an ideal Haskell lecturer. Culturally he belongs to both East and West. The vast changes in the cultural life of China are so recent as to fall within the span of his youthful age and in many of these movements he has been a pioneer and a trusted leader. . . ."

Indeed, how did this ideal Haskell lecturer present the Chinese Renaissance to his American audience, and what did *renaissance* mean in this specific verbal instance? A close look at Hu's words in the preface is helpful:

> If I have any thesis to present, I want my readers to understand that cultural changes of tremendous significance have taken place and are taking place in China. . . . Slowly, quietly, but unmistakably, the Chinese Renaissance is becoming a reality. The product of this rebirth looks suspiciously occidental. But, scratch its surface and you will find that the stuff of which it is made is essentially the Chinese bedrock which much weathering and corrosion have only made stand out more clearly—the humanistic and rationalistic China resurrected by the touch of the scientific and democratic civilization of the new world.

Once again, *renaissance* is used to describe a cultural change of tremendous significance

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and to declare that something fascinating has taken and is taking place, although here the word is spoken to an audience not unfamiliar with what *renaissance* originally meant. Hu's American audience might have been excited about the set of images, vocabularies, and ideas the trope conjures up, but they must also have wondered what Hu meant by *renaissance* as he talked about the "humanistic and rationalistic China resurrected by the touch of the scientific and democratic civilization of the new world." "Is this a real Renaissance?" they might have asked. The term *renaissance* in Hu's lecture takes on a thematic dimension and becomes a creation beyond any correspondence with the "real" Renaissance they knew. Hu's text invites its audience to push the question one step further and ask, "Was the Renaissance I know a real Renaissance?" Perhaps what is real is a certain kind of theoretical practice that first took place in Europe and then emerged again and again in response to various circumstances. Perhaps the question of authenticity and realness should be replaced by the question of circulation and performativity.[11]

In fact, Hu is not interested in exploring the connection between the Chinese Renaissance and the European Renaissance, even though the third lecture, "The Chinese Renaissance," starts with a summary of three prominent features shared by the European Renaissance and the May Fourth literary revolution, which Hu terms the Chinese Renaissance: (1) both set out to replace classical literature with a new literature in the living language of the people; (2) both were movements of conscious protest against many established cultural ideas and institutions and of conscious emancipation of the individual from the bondage of tradition; (3) both were humanist movements. One may well question whether these are prominent features of the European Renaissance or rather of Hu's representation. But either way Hu seems to care little, and he leaves the comparison hastily and moves on to his next argument: "there [have] been many periods of Chinese Renaissance" (45)—first, the Tang-dynasty rise of the great poets and of a new prose literature modeled after the classical style; second, the development of a secular neo-Confucianist philosophy in the Song dynasty; third, the rise of the dramas in the thirteenth century and the rise of the great novels; fourth, the development in the last three hundred years of classical scholarship with its philological and historical approach; and fifth, finally, the literary revolution just mentioned. If these are all Chinese Renaissances, then certainly the Chinese Renaissance bears little resemblance to the European one. Only the latest instance of the Chinese Renaissance was influenced by intimate contact with the European culture. Hu's elaboration of the May Fourth literary revolution as a fully conscious and studied movement different from earlier movements also frames it as the last phase of the Chinese Renaissance rather than as the Chinese counterpart of the European Renaissance. Renaissance, in Hu's presentation, becomes a totally indigenous Chinese phenomenon, deeply rooted in the historical development of Chinese culture.

To avoid leaving the wrong impression, I mention that Hu's view of the literary revolution is still centered on language. He defines the problem to which the literary revolution offers the solution as that of "finding a suitable language which could serve as an effective means of educating the vast millions of children and of illiterate adults" (48). He terms the mission of the Chinese Renaissance "a new language, a new literature, a new outlook on life and society, and a new scholarship" (46). However, the language shift that took place in the European Renaissance, which Hu drew on in promoting the Chinese vernacular movement fifteen years before, is not highlighted in his narrative of the making of the national language in China. When he gives the account of his activities and contributions to the movement, he talks about his debates with his literary friends in the United

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States, his experiments with the vernacular in poetry writing, and most important, his study of Chinese history and literature with a newly acquired scientific method. In a word, it is his pragmatism that he implies helped guide this vernacular movement, the Chinese Renaissance. He situates the rise of the vernacular in China in a world historical context, but in contrast to his essays of fifteen years earlier, he mentions nothing about important European figures like Dante or Luther, who heroically promoted the vernacular. What he offers is a scientific explanation that proves Mandarin Chinese has all the qualifications that a national language ought to possess—his "touch of the scientific . . . civilization of the new world." *Renaissance* in Hu's rhetoric becomes a figure of speech that both pulls his audience along and pushes them back while the trope is contested and unsettled and the assumptions and opinions are defied and denied. Here *renaissance* functions as a conceit, a linguistic stretch that challenges the addressee's understanding and tolerance as the addresser reinvents the word and uses it in a new way. If fifteen years earlier Hu's conscious appropriation and manipulation of *renaissance* helped facilitate the transformation of the vernacular in China from a vulgar tongue to the national language, his reinvention and refashioning of *renaissance* in this context explores a unique space at the border between two cultures.

The Renaissance, the Chinese Renaissance, and Other Renaissances

In his work on the Bengal Renaissance, David Kopf comments on a unique phenomenon that has yet to become the subject of a scholarly systematic analysis.

> The prototype of Renaissance that depicted a specific period in the history of Italian civilization and later the humanist movements of northern Europe has been appropriated after a fashion to include a cluster of people with a new consciousness of themselves as cultures. Works have appeared on Arab renaissance, social awakening in Iran, Hebrew renaissance, the Black renaissance of colonial Africa, or Black renaissance in America, Turkish renaissance, Chinese renaissance, and of course, last but not the least, Bengal renaissance. (123)

What Kopf has noticed is the pervasiveness of certain transcultural practices that make use of renaissance both in terms of declaration and creation. The powerful position that Western culture assumed in these times and spaces granted the term *renaissance* a certain aura that ideas from marginal spaces do not have. But our attentions to these creative uses of renaissance in various geopolitical contexts should not be confined to the hierarchical relation forced by the power. The circulation of renaissance out of its historical origin shows the fluidity and mobility of the idea and reveals the power structure that directs the traffic, but, more important, it celebrates the transcultural imagination exercised by the people who participated in a complicated network of literary and cultural exchange.

David Damrosch in *What Is World Literature?* proposes a refreshing way to articulate the problem of world literature. Investigating the ways literary works change as they move from national to global contexts, Damrosch argues that world literature should not be perceived as a canon of texts but rather as a mode of circulation and reading. He observes:

> A work enters into world literature by a double process; first, by being read as literature; second by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin. . . . As it moves into the sphere of world literature, far from inevitably suffering a loss of authenticity or essence, a work can gain in many ways. . . . To understand the workings of world literature, we need more a phenomenology than an ontology of the work of art. . . . (6)

Damrosch's proposal of a phenomenology may help us discuss how ideas move into the sphere of world literature. To understand how

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renaissance moves in the sphere of world literature and world history, we need more a phenomenology than an ontology of renaissance. Instead of approaching renaissance as an ontologically autonomous subject that existed in the remote past, perhaps it is time to think of it as an accumulation of various readings and appropriations practiced by different interpreters in different contexts. And it is in this sense that I believe it is possible to abandon the old, European-centered notion of renaissance and to propose renaissance as an open semiosis, subject to change, subject to redefinition and revision. After all, it is hard to imagine that a great idea would be fixed and defined (dead?) at its birth; it is only natural that the idea would grow and be enriched, blossoming in other places at other times. A comparative and transcultural reading of the European Renaissance, the Chinese Renaissance, and other Renaissances may help reveal a new pattern of world literature that has been largely ignored.[12]

Notes

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[1] My examination of Hu's encounter with Sichel's book benefits from Robert Darnton's illuminating study of best sellers in prerevolutionary France, which showed that meanings do not come prepackaged in discourses but rather are shaped by various circumstances. Darnton's work has made it easier for scholars to pay attention to popular genres and to explore the role of publishers and booksellers when discussing the reception of ideas.

[2] In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt uses "contact zones" to designate the social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other. While I adopt the term, I do not emphasize the highly asymmetrical power relations of domination and subordination inherent in her study.

[3] Instead of uncovering an essence of the Renaissance, Burckhardt may have looked at the Renaissance with a particular horizon of expectation and found that some neglected aspects resonated with him.

[4] For more discussions on the problem of translation and translingual practice in modern China, see Liu.

[5] See the invention of the word *transculturation* in Ortiz: "the word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation" (102–03).

[6] For discussions of diglossia and of premodern China as a diglossic community, see Charles Ferguson's seminal essay "Diglossia." Jerry Norman in his book *Chinese* agrees with Ferguson.

[7] See Milena Dolezelova-Velingerova for a detailed discussion of language reform in the late Qing period.

[8] Hu's eight tenets called for a new literature that would replace the archaic and allusion-laden classical poetry and prose that dominated the Chinese literary scene at the time. For further discussions on the May Fourth literary revolution, see C. T. Hsia; Michelle Yeh; and Edward Gunn.

[9] See Bruno Migliorini. The vernacular gained considerable ground in the fourteenth century, although the main contributions to the development of the vulgar tongue were made by the likes of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, who drew strength from their knowledge of the classics and in their efforts to give artistic nobility to Italian. In the early fifteenth century, the vernacular went through a crisis. The humanists' exaltation of Latin lowered the vernacular in public esteem. However, in the last decades of the century, the humanists' search for a pure Latin only increased the uses of the vernacular in practical spheres. Between 1470 and 1550, printing made a decisive contribution to the stability and uniformity of language in Italy. The final codification of a standard written language occurred in the sixteenth century. The national language of Italy that Hu refers to did not even exist until a unified Italy was established in the nineteenth century.

[10] It is tempting to approach Hu's appropriations of the Renaissance as instances of Occidentalism defined by Xiaomei Chen as "a discursive practice that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others" (2). The reason I am hesitant to do so is that Chen's Occidentalism is in a way a derivative of orientalism, as Chen herself acknowledges: "Chinese Occidentalism is the product of Western Orientalism, even if its aims are largely and specifically Chinese" (5). I am not denying that Hu's worldview is highly influenced by the Western thought, but I do not think that should be considered a case study of Western world domination. On the other hand, the emphasis of my paper

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is certainly not on the workings of power relations. My choice not to focus on them is a response to the overarching power of the theory of power. Sometimes one wonders whether obsessively talking about power merely reinforces power, verbally and in other ways. For this reason, I prefer a more neutral term such as *transculturation*.

[11] Edward Said, in his "Traveling Theory," discusses what happens to a theory when it is used in different circumstances and for new reasons. "Theory," writes Said, "in short, can never be complete. . . . [N]o system or theory exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported" (210–11). The idea of renaissance might well be perceived as a theory born in sixteenth-century Italy and reborn again and again in new contexts.

[12] One may even suggest that a comparative and transcultural reading of European modernity (modernities?), Chinese modernity (modernities?), and other modernities can lead to a reconsideration of the problem of modernity on the basis of new conceptual criteria. Perhaps there does not have to be one "modernity" with alternative others.

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