

## Surfaces



# INTRODUCTION TO LEE OU-FAN LEE'S "SOMES NOTES ON 'CULTURE', 'HUMANISM', AND THE 'HUMANITIES' IN MODERN CHINESE CULTURAL DISCOURSES"

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Volume 5, 1995

DEUXIÈME CONGRÈS INTERNATIONAL SUR LE DISCOURS  
HUMANISTE (1995)  
SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON HUMANISTIC  
DISCOURSE (1995)

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065001ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065001ar>

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### Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

### ISSN

1188-2492 (print)  
1200-5320 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this document

Iser, W. (1995). INTRODUCTION TO LEE OU-FAN LEE'S "SOMES NOTES ON 'CULTURE', 'HUMANISM', AND THE 'HUMANITIES' IN MODERN CHINESE CULTURAL DISCOURSES". *Surfaces*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065001ar>

### Article abstract

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**Acknowledgments:**

Surfaces would like to thank the following organizations for their support: Apple Canada for providing essential equipment, Industrie Canada, the SSHRC and MESSQ for funding, and the University of Montreal for infrastructural support.

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ISSN: 1188-2492

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the context of the Second International Conference on Humanistic Discourse, this text introduces Lee Ou-fan Lee's "Some Notes on 'Culture,' 'Humanism,' and 'Humanities' in Modern Chinese Cultural Discourses" and reports on the central concerns that emerged in its discussion.

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Dans le cadre du deuxième congrès international sur le discours humaniste, ce texte est une introduction à «Quelques notes sur la "culture", "l'humanisme" et les "sciences humaines" dans les discours culturels de la Chine moderne» de Lee Ou-fan Lee, et rapporte les principaux pôles d'intérêt qui ont émergé au cours de la discussion.

This paper maps out three different, though closely interrelated fields which bring into focus both the importance and the function of what has come to be called 'humanism' in recent Chinese intellectual history. First of all, the term appears to carry multifarious and at times opposing connotations. Second, what in Western terminology is dubbed cultural discourse in all its variety is acted out and debated primarily in a public sphere. Third, in spite of a steadily expanding visually-oriented media culture, the written word is still predominant. Now the question arises as to the extent to which these realms converge, and, in tracing their common ground, this paper also throws into relief pertinent features of the cultural situation in twentieth-century China.

It is interesting to note that the Chinese character "wen," which originally means pattern, forms part of the compound for both culture and literature. Apart from the implicit predominance of writing as the hallmark of culture, the common root makes culture and literature into a template. As a structured prefiguration, the template provides guidelines for the life of culture as a continual patterning. However, the exact nature and implementation of this patterning remains an open question, because the pattern is basically an empty structure which needs to be filled. This may account for all the variants of "humanism" focused on by the paper. Controversial and even contradictory, the types of humanism advanced all appear as attempts to define forms and set up goals for cultural patterning.

Why is there such a range of different brands of humanism, some of which even try to dissociate themselves from established forms by changing their nomenclature from humanism to humanitarianism? Irrespective of the different shades of meaning which the term "humanism" entails, and irrespective of how the various brands dismiss one another, it is their common

denominator which sets them in conflict, because all of them are intimately associated with modernity. There is a competition going on between them as to how modernity is to be conceived, and such a conceptualization is all the more pressing as modernity can /pp. 5-6/ no longer be confined within the classical tradition. If the latter cannot offer an adequate structure, what is now needed is either a repatterning or different patterns altogether.

This may be one of the reasons why Chinese humanism looks to the West for models not available in the inherited tradition, seeking to borrow ideas that can help in the urgent task of shaping modernity. This absorption of ideas from beyond the pale of Chinese culture is still in line with the Chinese notion of culture as a force for patterning human life.

In view of the necessity to chart this dawning modernity, it is almost inevitable that the ensuing debate raging between the different cultural discourses can be acted out only in a public sphere. The intellectual has to leave the academy and to go on to the "marketplace", not least as the seat of learning tends to become not only a selective, but even a fairly exclusive institution. The public sphere, however, is an open space allowing an intense and lively interchange between intellectuals, academics, writers, and readers, all of whom wish to address a wider public.

Moreover, the public sphere conditions the type of discourse to be developed, as the latter is designed to make an impact on those segments of the population who are to be subjected to the ideas promulgated. Such an intensified interchange favors the short form of writing, such as the essay, the newspaper column, and their variants. Ideas have to be driven home in a pithy and appealing format, which accounts for the welter of journals and magazines that give the public sphere its checkered patterning.

Thus the overriding importance of the public sphere prevents the multifarious cultural discourse from ossifying, a process to which such discourse is prone when confined by and developed inside the academy. On such an open marketplace, so it seems, the inherent scholasticism of the politicised cultural discourses churned out by the academies of the West is unlikely to meet with success.

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Now the question arises as to whether there is a possible link between the importance of the public sphere and the predominance of the written word. Obviously writing serves as a vehicle for making tradition continuous, which to a large extent a media culture is unable to do. But is it only the intimate connection between tradition and writing that gives preference to the word over the image? It appears that language has a dual function. Apart from transposing the cultural past into the present, it is also tied to reality, which it makes graspable. However, as language does not seem to have any priority over reality, the ancient root of both culture and literature as a pattern again comes to the fore. The written language turns out to be an important agent for shaping reality, on which it imprints its patterns.

It is the interconnection of the features outlined that give salience to contemporary Chinese culture. The guiding principle underlying the latter is in pronounced contrast to what one is familiar with in the West, and this seems to be the point at which the paper poses those questions that are intimately linked to our common pursuit. Is there a way of conveying to another culture, such as that of the West, what this contrast entails, how it is to be conceived, what may be its motivations, its virtues, and its advantages, and where and why the outsider might fail to comprehend what happens in a culture which defies familiar modes of orientation? Is there even a chance to rationalize those features that elude our grasp?



If the humanities now have to cope with such questions, humanistic discourse is bound to assume an additional function to the one exercised thus far. Its future function will be dual, i. e., it will operate both intraculturally and cross-culturally, and this will have repercussions on its internal structure. As long as it functions intraculturally, humanistic discourse is bound to formulate objectives, projects, aims to be achieved, and it will provide a horizon towards which the culture is supposed to move. This is extremely well illustrated in the present paper, even to the point at which objectives, aims, and the overall horizon become a matter of dispute. From this we may infer that an intraculturally /pp. 7-8/ operating humanistic discourse is basically teleologically-oriented, starting out from presuppositions whose implications have to be asserted. Thus the thrust for shaping and patterning realities is once again in evidence.

If humanistic discourse is meant to operate cross-culturally, its salient features will be subjected to alterations, as the difference between cultures has to be negotiated. Starting out from presuppositions can no longer be an issue, because assumptions could not be superimposed on what is to be brought within the range of comprehension, interaction or exchange. There are none of the objectives striven for by intracultural humanistic discourse. Instead, presuppositions are at best steering devices for a mode of discourse that is bound to operate cybernetically in recursive loops. This mode develops as an interchange between output and input, in the course of which an initial assumption is corrected insofar as it has failed to square with what it has targeted. Consequently, a dual correction occurs: the feed forward returns as an altered feedback loop which, in turn, feeds into a revised output. Such a recursion is intensified by the fact that each output, in cybernetic terms, makes inroads into the organization of the culture targeted, and such

interventions bounce back as a heightened complexity of information.

For this reason the frames of reference of the cultures concerned have to be suspended. With the inherited frameworks thus invalidated, a cross-cultural discourse has to establish its own guidelines, but it cannot simply exchange one frame of reference for another; instead, it has to establish multiple references in order to provide sufficient orientation for all the eventualities of the encounter. This entails the exploration of different routes of reference.

Designation, exemplification, and expression as the basic referential criteria no longer function within any given frame of reference. Instead, they are made to substitute for one another, and the ensuing interchange of their referential modes produces the guidelines along which a cross-cultural discourse unfolds /pp. 8-9/ its operations. Thus one culture designates something in another in order to exemplify what cannot be seen by the culture concerned. In this way it may turn into an expression of what that culture is like. A discourse that liberates its referential control from any given frames of reference has to generate its own control by constantly shifting modes of reference. Only interchanging references can guide the recursive looping triggered by the response of a culture when it is invaded. And the recursive looping, in turn, makes the references themselves loop into one another, thus converting designation, exemplification, and expression into mutually exchangeable functions.

These features by no means exhaust the structure of the cross-cultural discourse that has to be developed in view of the ever increasing encounters between different cultures. But however it may be orchestrated in the future, the feedback loop will remain

its indispensable matrix, replacing the presuppositions of intracultural humanistic discourse, moving them into perspective, and thus allowing us to conceive their culture-bound specificity.

### **Discussion summary**

It became apparent in the discussion that there was a great divergence of parameters pertaining to certain key concepts which distinguish Chinese and Western cultures. This applied in particular to literature, critical theory, and humanistic discourse, all of which appear to be global ideas, whereas in actual fact they only serve to highlight different taxonomies in the cultures concerned.

Literature turned out to be a basically Eurocentric umbrella notion for various types of writing that defy translation into Chinese, in which verse is the privileged form, designed to intervene in the public sphere or carve out a public space in social life.

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The situation is similar with comparative literature, which even in Europe is of recent vintage. Owing to the diversity of European literatures, comparison seems to provide a unifying principle. Difference between literatures, however, is basically empty, which means that comparison itself is an empty category. There is no comparative literature in China, although writing as practiced on the Mainland, Hong-Kong, and Taiwan is certainly not uniform. Instead of comparison, there is a crisscrossing of boundaries which establishes interaction and commerce.

Meanwhile even in America and Europe the notion of comparative literature is in decline. This process has been accelerated by confrontation between the written and the visual

media, triggering a back and forth movement, out of which arise forms of insight that are no longer to be classified in terms of a unified entity.

The different taxonomies are equally obvious when it comes to grasping the function and idea of theory. In spite of the eagerness to transport Western theory into China, there is also a sense of distance. From a Western angle, theory that travels is taken to be an indication of a postcolonial situation, while theory imported from the West into China is something of a Trojan horse. On the one hand, it serves the government to browbeat intellectuals, and, on the other, it is a downright luxury for those who want to promote certain cultural issues in the face of stiff resistance.

As for humanistic discourse, there is no clear-cut definition of it, such as one finds in the Eurocentered version. Only variations of humanism can be discerned in China, and these variations — if they ever assume any sort of discourse — are not primarily representative or self-reflexive, but interactional and designed to intervene in the public sphere. Thus the public sphere is, to some extent, molded and shaped by the various brands of humanism, in contrast to which the humanistic discourse of the West radiates the sterility of the ivory tower. From the West differences relating to the 'nature' of humanistic discourse appear to be stylistic; /pp. 10-11/ from a Chinese point of view humanism and/or humanitarianism is an interventionist ideology that seeks to reshape existing social situations.

The discussions were all characterized by a split, accentuating the gap that separates Chinese from Western culture. But even the way in which this space was negotiated spotlights the difference. The West seeks to globalize its concepts, building

bridges to incorporate everything that is alien, whereas the Chinese tend to plead for a continual crisscrossing, which characterizes their own domestic experience of handling differences.

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