

## From the Life of AUCA

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### *Minutes of the Annual Conference 2009 of ACLA, March 26-29, Harvard, Cambridge*

The Annual Conference of the ACLA (American Comparative Literature Association) was hosted this time by Harvard University in Cambridge, MA. The challenging title *Global Language, Local Cultures* brought together scholars from virtually every continent of the literary globe to a bracing exchange of ideas: 2000 participants from about more than 50 countries. The Harvard Department of Contemporary Literature organized this international event, featuring round tables and plenary panels with leading scholars on most urgent problems of teaching the world literature, discussions and presentations in more than 200 seminars. The atmosphere of the historic campus helped to add much to our experience of Harvard: why not to stay for a cup of coffee at Emerson Hall? Or just to get absorbed with literary treasures at the Widener library? Or visit the book exhibit in a regally ornate, wood-paneled Thompson Room of the Barker Center?

Sandra Bermann in her ACLA Presidential address *Working in the 'And' Zone: Comparative Literature and Translation* raised the burning issues of this most vital ground where writers and scholars meet each other. The plenary session *Writing Locally in Global Languages* featured prominent contemporary novelists: the Chinese American woman writer Gish Jen (known by the novels *Typical American*, *Love Wife*) and the Libyan author Elias Khoury (novels *Gate of the Sun*, *Yalo*). The following plenary discussion on *Teaching World Literature* brought together another starry group of scholars – Stephen Owen (author of

the *Anthology of the Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*), Zhao Beisheng, Paolo Horta, Rosemary Feal (MLA).

Due to the effort of David Damrosch, the author of *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Program Committee, the venues covered all imaginable interests, from classical studies to postmodernism, from ancient epics to hypertext. The landscape of world literature has changed from a focus on a global perspective to that of newly emerging or revitalized literatures of Asia, South America, and Eastern Europe. For the most part, these new literatures originated under the influence of global cultural forces and languages, like English, French, Russian and accordingly, certain well-established literary canon and expression. Literary emancipation of Asian literatures, due to the instinctive nature of their native language or dialect, or in relation to their cultural archetype, forms a different array in the tapestry of the world literature and proto-aesthetics of the global word. We were interested in interrelations between tradition and transformation, culture and expression, language and literary form, various aspects of modern Asian literatures, like feminism and the idea of Femininity in Oriental tradition, globalism and locality. Some grotesque is obvious regarding the meaning of “new”, when, for example, lately materialized Chinese literature (after prolonged suffocation during the *Cultural Revolution*), comes under the rank of the “new” artistic phenomena. And, at the same time, literature of Taiwan is attaining status of an autonomous cultural entity, exhausting itself in deep identity search. Language is no longer a proof of national belonging, with a vast international wave of Anglophone writers that do not deny their original national identity, as in case of Malaysia or India. But even the writers of the Diasporas on a universal scale show a tendency to search for a mythologized identity with the lost motherland.

Thus, the literary panorama seems to be not fractured, but, so to say, increasingly specified, culturally individualized. The general pace of assimilative process in contemporary *new* literatures, and by that we mean a “backward”, or national (and not civilizational) re-assimilation, has developed high-range, momentary fluctuation between the past and fleeting now, death and life, escape and belonging. The catastrophic element is increasing. The search for national identity, rooted in personalized myth, supports the slightly shifted balance of time and space.

Our seminar was entitled *New Literatures of Asia: Language, Tradition, Transformation* and we worked for two days in a group of eight in the historic building of the Barker Center. The group included scholars from South Korea – Prof. Eunkyung Oh (Dongduk Women’s University, Seoul), from Japan – Prof. Bernard Wilson (University of Tokyo), USA – Meiling Wu (University of Calif. State East Bay University). Our presenters are specialists in Oriental literatures, fluent in several Asian languages. Prof. Bernard Wilson, a versatile scholar, introduced the literature that was literally new to all of us – the Anglophone Malaysian novels. Eunkyung Oh, besides her distinct knowledge of Korean culture, mastered the Turkish language and served our guide into a hard trail of women liberation in both Confucian and Islamic cultures. Meiling Wu gave us a subtle performance in her artistic interpretation of the paintings of Gao Xingjian, a Chinese author who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2000, now a French émigré. Gao Xingjian is probably, the only author who designs his own books. We also had postgraduate American students working on their dissertations: Farkhondeh Shayesteh who specializes in Persian language, speaks Japanese and is interested in interpretation of the modern Iranian author Sadeq Hedayat (*Buf-e Kur*) according to Hedegger’s *Sein und Zeit*. Sharon Wang (University

of South Carolina) in a paper on Taiwanese literature (Zhu Tianxin's novella *Old Capital*) examines the effect of nostalgia caused by, as she says, "the erasure of Chineseness, culturally, politically, and historically, from the construction of indigenous Taiwanese identity." Junjie Luo introducing an exiting contemporary Chinese author Yu Hua read into catastrophe as literary device, symbol and human condition in Yu Hua's famous novel *To Live*. He also succeeded to show how such contrasting aesthetics as a Chinese tale and an American comic can converge in new art.

The Kyrgyz literature was represented at the forum by the rediscovered writings and philosophy of Kubatbek Djusubaliev, thanks to the efforts of his family, particularly, his daughter Jamby Djusubalieva. A forbidden author under the rule of the Soviet Empire, he saw his novels published for the first time in the 1990's. He lives in the mountains of Alai, a reclusive thinker; his friends call him "dervish" ("a walking man"). In the *Seven Words and Confucius*, a collection of essays, poems and early novellas published part in Kyrgyz, part in the Russian language (poems) we find an expression of his ideas on the destiny of man, spiritual situation of the contemporary world and the cultural legacy of his native Central Asian state – Kyrgyzstan.

He expresses a sharp intellectual picture of a contradictory world breaking up with the tradition, language and customs of the ancestors. The fear of the disappearing Word, distorted Logos, had forced him to stick devotedly to the local (Alai) Kyrgyz dialect – a symbol of roots and home, though his choice cut off a majority of readers not familiar with the language of his writings in his own land. Stylistically, he inherited complexity of expression inherent in Western intellectual tradition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The novels *My Love Flies to You as a Bird*, *The Sun Didn't Finish His Self-Portrait* and others represent poetic, comic, nostalgic canvass, deeply human in all its overtones, the reflection of a lonely artist. In meditations of the *Lonely Notes*, he is facing the social signs of the "end of the Human" with a stoic acceptance of life and a vision of everlasting spiritual heights of the Ancient Oriental philosophy and the Bible that can give answers to the contemporary human situation.

The revival of his novels, due to the spirit of time, is a challenging fact that allows us to recognize Kyrgyz literature not as some "post-colonial" or other equivalent of a global *trend*, but as a unique historic archetype of their people and the mystery of their beliefs and their language.

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## *The World According to Kubatbek*

Virtually unknown to a greater literary world, the name of **Kubatbek Djusubaliev** has much to say to his Kyrgyz contemporaries. A forbidden author under the rule of the Soviet