

Ambiguity as a Re-structuring Force

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Ambiguity is a cultural phenomenon. In a synchronic perspective, it is a reaction of established intelligence to what is out of control, and it depends on social conventions for its definition. Diachronically, ambiguity happens in a specific temporal-spatial situation, and what is clear or unclear changes constantly with time and place. Conflation of the two visions into a cognitive panorama so as to work out a schema with universal applicability is a pre-linguistic, metaphysical illusion, a copy of the Hegelian 'unity of logic and history.'

Ambiguity in this article refers to several social happenings on the mainland of China during the 1990s. I will suspend mention of diachronic instances during this period, mentioning them only when it is necessary. Thus, ambiguity is defined in the following context as the semantic effect of a deliberate or non-intentional juxtaposition of different forms, styles, ideas and even political ideologies within an identical text, which renders reductionism, in terms of meaning attribution, extremely difficult. This postmodern collage, anachronistic as it appears to be, has fast become a national penchant since the early 1990s, creating a lifestyle and generating disparate responses in Chinese academic circles. Like it or not, distancing from clarity works quite well in everyday life and disturbs both conservative nostalgia and liberal radicalism.

To verify this argument, I have selected two events, among many others, from real life, and I hope that their re-presentation might illustrate how ambiguity is dismantling the conventional interpretative hierarchy, and undermining value standards prescribed by the ruling ideology. One event comes from the pop culture while the other relates to the official strategy for ideological inculcation. They represent, in a symbolic way, the naive and the sophisticated, or individual and public authority. Neither of the above is able to resist the temptation of ambiguity as a re-structuring force in Chinese social life. The two events will further be exposed to a semiotic vision, and then an epistemological survey in order to show how they, as postmodern artifacts, dramatize an on-going cultural re-identification in the drive for material modernization. In the Epilogue, I shall try to put a limit on the legitimacy of the ambiguity by placing it within a wider context.

Event One: Misplacement of Symbols

In the weekend page of a Guangzhou-centered but nationally distributed newspaper *Yang Cheng Evening* for Nov.10, 1996, an interesting article appeared under the title of "Misplacement as a Fashion." It juxtaposes two true stories from real life, both concerning fashion shows. The first show was organized by hand picked top students---morally and intellectually good boys and girls---from one of the best high schools in Guangzhou as a special performance dedicated to the yearly Science and Art Festival. Students acted as models, displaying new school uniforms designed by themselves to promote not only school discipline but also spiritual civilization under Chinese socialism. The schoolmaster was very much worried about the potential effectiveness of the new design, because he knew there was nothing new, let alone sensational, in the design, though his chief responsibility was to guarantee the students' moral purity and ideological fidelity. Contrary to his pessimistic anticipation, however, the show came through with flying colors. Excitement shook the hall when the student models walked in, accompanied by Madonna's sensual song 'Like a Virgin.' Auntie Madonna's appealingly sexy voice neutralized the monotonous conformity encoded in the uniforms, presenting an audio-visual spectacle in which God and Devil, so to speak, danced together. The schoolmaster did not catch the point of the song because the English words were unintelligible to him. The music sounded like commonplace disco. For these students who fed on MTV mish mash as daily nourishment, there was nothing really fresh or imaginative in the show. It had been great fun and nothing else.

The second show was professional and commercial. Beautiful female bodies, dressed in wildly styled bikinis as explosive and colorful as bursting bombs, weaved back and forth on the stage. With a gentle but highly seductive smile, each girl wore a Red Army cap and stepped to the tempo of a familiar revolutionary battle song originally composed to stir up class-consciousness on the part of poor peasant women, and to consolidate their communist ideal. What a shocking juxtaposition! Just think of the strong French and American reaction to the film 'The Last Temptation of Christ' and one can imagine the possible impact of the show upon Chinese moral/political conventions. Yet this collage of two mutually excluding codes proved no less successful. Incidentally, no censorship came from the ideological authorities. Here is the journalist's commentary:

"I am at a loss to say anything positive or negative. I just have a feeling that the bikini and 'Like a Virgin' should go together, while the Red Army cap matches the new school uniform well. Of course, this is merely my suggestion. I know misplacement of symbols has become the Fashion in China."

Event Two: Neo-*San Zi Jing*

San Zi Jing, analogous in function to the Christian catechism, is a Confucian canon prepared in the form of doggerel or nursery rhymes with a view to instilling moral regulations into innocent, naive minds. Each line comprises three Chinese ideograms (*San*=three, *Zi*=ideograms or characters), so that it is easy for children to commit the *Jing* (canon text) to memory. Moral preaching underlines the content, and the first two lines present an assumption on which the whole ethic-political edifice of Confucianism is based: "In the beginning/Human nature is good."

Here is an anthropological horizon in which original sin and class consciousness are absolutely missing. Such text runs counter to the Marxist canon, and consequently has to be dismissed, if not completely eliminated, from Chinese consciousness. To follow (post) structuralist terminology, the *San Zi Jing* can be regarded as a marginalized event far away from the center of the predominant structure.

Then another event occurred in 1995, a project sponsored by the Propaganda Department of the Party Committee of Guangdong Province that was implemented by instructors as well as professors from Zhongshan University where I am employed. It is called Neo-*San Zi Jing*.

This new canon is much more ambitious in the sense that it manages to conglomerate a large variety of subjects or themes concerning human history, cognition, ethics, law, literature and art, modern science and technology, and even ecological conservation. This arrangement of content disregards the modern division of disciplines, jumbles together diverse classes of information, and makes the text superficially interdisciplinary. It fails to bring all the fragmented topics to a narrative unity, leaving each at the level of 'surface meaning,' as Foucault would have it, without any unique depth as a cohesive force. As for its structure, the new canon maintains the established form: three words in each line, which constitutes the basic narrative unit. But, in contrast to the original, there is no logical connection between one unit and another, and the montage jumps freely across space and time. As a matter of fact, not a single unit can work logically as 'The Word' or as metadiscourse to regulate the signification of the whole text. Meaning emerges only in the interaction and counteraction between different lines with different meanings, depending on the reader (teacher and student) for its fixation. This structural deployment, it seems to me, perfectly meets post-ideological needs in China: an imaginary convergence of different master concepts or 'grand narratives,' as Lyotard would have it --classical Marxism, Confucianism, Deng Xiao-ping's innovation, science and technology, market economy, democracy, etc. --hoping for a new grand narrative, but without grandness. Shall we

call it grand eclecticism in parallel with populist eclecticism? In passing, the project has made big money in the local market, a sharp contrast to more conventional money consuming ideological campaigns.

Response to this postmodern kaleidoscopic event varies according to the receivers' hermeneutic fore-structures. Local state-manipulated mass media hail it as another success in developing spiritual civilization under Chinese socialism; Enlightenment addled intellectuals regard it as a laughing stock and keep a safe distance from any discussions or meetings on its significance; modernity-oriented critics make a big story out of one or two unconventional or incorrect word usages though they are not as fastidious about the ungrammaticality in modernistic literature; students get a new type of textbook not necessarily generating a sense of spiritual sublimation, but surely less dull than older texts in terms of ideological infusion; Marxist fundamentalists, small in number and out of power but potentially influential, might consider it yet another blasphemy and deplore the violence it does to the purity of Marxism. Co-existing in an identical milieu, the disparate textual elements combine to symbolize a new mode of communication in Chinese public life: the sender can no longer control, as he or she once had, the interpretation of the message.

More thought provoking is the fact that the project-designers and their co-operators from the university, as far as I know, were not interested at all in post-modernism. Some might even hate the term. This paradox testifies to a postmodern argument that cultural industry is not controlled by its workers any more than its products are the 'objectivation' (*Vergegenständlichung*) of a spiritual force emanating from the subject or producer, but are a multi-layered text of 'intersubjectivity.' It signifies 'the demise of the author,' as Roland Barthes put it. He or she is decentered. The relevance of Barthes' idea to modern Chinese reading conventions which tend to be manipulated by one sub-divine author or another should never be overestimated. It is not a laughing stock but a remarkable mutation.

A Semiotic Vision

At first glance, the two events are different: one conflates the noble and the obscene into what Russian Formalism called 'carnival' while the other attempts to integrate diametrically opposed master concepts. In a semiotic vision, however, we can find an identical strategy for meaning creation. Both neglect conventional syntax and grammar, project incompatible paradigms on a synchronic screen, and construct an unfamiliar sequence of signs. To put it another way, in a sign system involving master concepts or grand narratives, individual elements are used somewhat as pure signifiers

through suspension of their initial signifieds which are then attached to new meanings (signifieds) which have yet to be anchored. The result is an ungrammatical sentence that estranges us from what is familiar, and shocks the orthodox-minded into an awareness of something derivative and challenging. Another result is a new pattern of communication, which demands a non-conventional reading in order to decipher its code system. The text lacks clarity because it violates ideological purity and puts conventional criteria in a dilemma. But, ambiguity arises not so much from a failure to follow the Law of Contradiction as from the foregrounding of a symbiosis of different elements in our life space. In this sense, ambiguity only offends logicalized common sense, not life itself. This is why our students reacted to the fashion show as great fun and nothing else, or less dull. As for the various negative reactions, they presuppose ideologies that attempt to divide life into what is acceptable and what is not.

To highlight its pertinence to the structural transformation of Chinese cultural life, it might be useful to recall Barthes' theory and give a brief account of his textual semiotics. In *Mythologies* and *Elements of Semiology*, Roland Barthes used a simplified version of the glossematic sign model developed by Hjelmslev, founder of the Copenhagen School of Linguistics. In contrast to Saussure, Barthes defined a sign as a system consisting of an 'expression' (E, corresponding to signifier) in relation (R) to a 'content' (C, corresponding to signified). A primary sign system E1R1C1 can become an element of a more complicated sign system. When change takes place in content, that is, the signified, the primary sign system becomes the expression, that is, the signifier of a secondary sign system. Then, we have E2(=E1R1C1)R2C2. The primary is called 'denotative' and the secondary 'connotative.' Barthes described the system of secondary meaning as 'myth' and this sphere of connotation as an 'ideology.' The mass media, propaganda and advertisement alike, according to Barthes, tend to conceal the nature of the secondary, connotative systems by making their messages sound or look primary, thus innocent, and by giving them a natural and eternal justification. A much-quoted example is a cover photo from the French magazine *Paris-Match* published in the mid-1950s. Picture (E) presents, that is, denotes, "a black African in a French uniform saluting a French flag"(C). But, behind this primary, denotative sign system E1R1C1, there exists the implicit yet strong connotation of a C2 that 'France is a great colonial Empire with loyal black citizens in its army.' Obviously, this is the commonest way in which ruling ideologies everywhere in the world create myths for the purpose of manipulating people's minds and regulating their behaviors.

For the benefit of comparison and contrast, let us call this *modern text semiotics*. We can see that semiosis--the action of signs--as expressed in Barthes' case studies is, to a certain extent, premeditated, and the deconstruction of a myth takes place in the

reader's critical mind which is more or less independent of the text. The basic strategy of modern myth, on the other hand, is to resort to a single master concept or grand narrative to produce illusions. It does not offend the reading convention and appeals to human conscious tendency to accept anything grammatical. The Chinese people are not unfamiliar with this type of myth. It had its heyday during the Cultural Revolution. *Postmodern Semiosis*, however, presents another picture, as I have demonstrated in the above two events. Lacking a master concept to control the text, it undermines the accepted grammar, upsets the reading convention, and generates a strange syntagmatic sequence in which meaning, either denotative or connotative, is at once differed and deferred, a postmodern phenomenon that Derrida calls '*differance*'. Here, opposites are mingled, the sacred is profaned, the indecent is made sacred, the monistic reductionism of interpretation is undercut, and the jolly relativity of all things, as Bakhtin would have it, is proclaimed. It is the text's self-deconstruction or semantic indeterminacy that touches the subliminal of both the author and the reader. A modern myth in the sense of Barthes' text semiotics cannot be established in this postmodern semiosis. Of course, collage is not a phenomenon unique to what we call postmodern age: we can find many similar cases in modern and pre-modern Chinese literature. I describe it as postmodern only because the mixing up of different code systems has become a fashion, and the mass production and wholesaling of mosaic artifacts has become a reality, which is reshaping our lifestyle and affecting our intellectual activities. It parallels Chinese avant-garde literature and art, but exerts a direct, immediate and much more powerful influence upon people's verbal/non-verbal behaviors, cultivating an environment of ideological plurality which theoretical criticism and student demonstration wished for, but failed to achieve during the 1980s.

An Epistemological Survey

Ambiguity as a problem is not merely a reaction to a monologue stage-managed by the predominant ideology. It is also a matter of cognition or of semiotics itself. In a Saussurean framework, semiosis refers to the differentiating movement of signs within a relatively closed system. Signification, the process of signifying, depends solely on a formal and hierarchical arrangement of opposites, suspending the significance of individual speakers and extra-linguistic social context, context that stands for specifically pragmatic situations and works as another necessary condition---together with *la langue*--- for successful communication. In a closed system, clarity gains from the maintenance of one element and the exclusion of the other. Ambiguity arises when what has been marginalized comes back. The point here is not that clarity and

ambiguity are the two sides of binarism, but that binarism itself is a construct or theoretically-camouflaged desire for order, not necessarily equivalent to reality. 'Interpretant,' the third term in Charles S. Peirce's semiotic framework which constitutes another sign and logically involves another system of signs or language game, but which always takes a specific individual interpreter for its actualization in the activity of interpretation, it is seemingly irrelevant to structuralism. Yet it does work, though in the disguise of the transcendental, Kantian, or more problematically, the universal subject of Hegel. Saussure, in his *Course in General Linguistics*, knows quite well that there is a limit to the synchronic approach and that one step further leads to the absurd. Unfortunately, in linguistic determinism---a logical fallacy that develops *la langue* as a necessary condition into a sufficient or necessarily sufficient condition for the possibility of communication--- language obtains an ontological status in spite of the efforts made by Greimas and Umberto Eco to deflate this metaphysical desire¹. It is an extension of the classical Marxist proposal that 'being determines thinking': language is being, and language is structure or, as poststructuralists and deconstructionists might say, an endless process of structuring along the 'trace.' The latter does not really transcend Saussure's theoretical vision. At each ring along the 'no-beginning and no-ending chain' of the Derridean 'trace,' there exists a structuralist arrangement of opposites, though the next ring undermines the proceeding one, which makes 'difference' possible.² Clarity remains legitimate within each hierarchical substructure. When theorists/critics turn to history or social practice, they take as their objects of study other texts and re-adopt a synchronic approach so as to locate something *a priori*.³ Structuralism dies hard. Saussure plays the role of a 20th century Kant.⁴

It is against this background that ambiguity is the necessary sacrifice—necessary, first cognitively and then ethically—at the altar of the true and the good. When poststructuralism stirred up a debate on determinacy/indeterminacy, it not only challenged conventional cognitive science and moral philosophy but also brought an impertinent problem into the field of literary criticism. Either in the Greek sense of aesthetics or in the Kantian sense of indeterminate or reflective judgment, as in *The Third Critique*, ambiguity is the very life of art and literature. Literary argumentation oriented around the determinacy/indeterminacy alternative is somewhat strange and misleading. It tends to shift away from the literature itself, even though we have to define what literature is in different historical periods. The debate--many participants are literary critics--has reduced the problem of the beautiful to the problem of the true. Dismantling the philosophical edifice gives rise to the epistemologizing of aesthetics. When confronted with an artistic work or poem, one no longer asks how beautiful it is, but what it means, or what political or moral messages it connotes through structuralist

analysis or deconstructionist procedure. To put it in another way, when one reads philosophy, that is, clarity, as literature, that is, as ambiguity, as Derrida prefers, the latter merges into the former. Critical of a time-honored Platonic assumption that philosophy is superior to poetry, we come back to Plato in the end. Literature prevails by identifying itself with epistemology. Of course, this is not the deconstructionism that Derrida's Chinese followers understand. To them, deconstruction is to turn the hierarchy upside down regardless of the fact that the result is also a hierarchy. This explains how and why conservatives and liberals, hostile to each other in many respects, share an identical pattern of cognition when they try to devalue the two events presented above on the basis of moral or political ambiguity. Such Chinese logic indicates that European binarism has largely obscured the significance of the traditional Yin-Yang logic, another construct according to which Yang marginalizes itself by marginalizing Yin and vice versa: a self-destruction rather than deconstruction. A healthy order in the universe, including human life, it assumes, lies somewhere, though constantly in a process of re-adjustment, between order and chaos. Such logic is ambiguous in nature but not in the sense of the clarity/ambiguity dichotomy. Such logic is the manifestation of what is called the Great Tao that stays beyond the reach of linguistic explanation. The Tao is immanent like God but not transcendent as God is supposed to be. Since what can be stated is not the eternal Tao which only manifests itself in various Yin-Yang movements, even though we employ a signifier 'Tao' to state it, the linguistic or any other semiotic expression referring to it only serves as a provisional device, something like Wittgenstein's 'ladder' that has to be thrown away after use. Absolute mysticism, Kant might respond, belongs to the thing-in-itself or the noumenal, and has to be excluded from the theory of knowledge. And that is exactly what has happened in Chinese intellectual life. Ambiguity has got some bad credit: cognitively confused and confusing, morally and politically irresponsible.

It has to be emphasized that post-structuralist shaping of the Chinese mind does not start with the introduction of Saussure and Derrida into China any more than binarism is the invention of 20th century European intelligence. Long ago, Spinoza formulated the principle that all '*determination is negation.*' To determine a thing is to cut it off from some sphere of being and so to limit it. To define is to set boundaries. Affirmation inevitably involves negation. This amounts to saying that one defines something—that is, reaching clarity—by excluding what it is not: a hallmark of structuralist methodology with respect to meaning creation. Drawing upon Spinoza but breaking the limit set by formal logic, Hegel took the converse idea that all '*negation is determination.*' To deny that a thing belongs to one class is to affirm that it belongs to some other class, though we may not know which—or still feel uncertain about—what

that class is. Putting the above two statements together, we have the very beginning of what is now called 'negative definition,' a method frequently used in contemporary theories of criticism. It seems, so far, that positive and negative or clarity and ambiguity are correlatives that mutually involve each other. Problems arise again when attempts are made to set up a hierarchy of thesis versus antithesis by placing them in a sequence of time and provide a solution in synthesis through the mystic sublation.

Hegelian-Marxist 'sublation' is interpreted, at least in Leninism and Maoism, as the destruction of the one by the other. "One eats up the other," as Mao used to say. In everyday Chinese books, as well as in high school text books, the hierarchy is described as the opposition, and the solution to it is sugar-coated, tasting like poetry: 'unity in diversity.' In real life, opposition means exclusion and unity monologue! Obviously, this understanding of reality has serious political, ethical and aesthetic consequences, sometimes bloody. The suppression of ambiguity, the co-existence of different code systems, is far more than semiotic trivialities locked in an academic ivory tower. When the notion of 'Difference is not opposition,' in the sense of Lyotard, finds legal expression in overwhelming artifacts, a new 'paradigm,' as Kuhn would have it, will prevail⁵.

A Mutation under Way

What I want to bring home in the above paragraph is a historical fact that long before the Cultural Revolution and even before the founding of the Republic in 1949, the idea of binarism and opposition had already merged into the Chinese intellectual subliminal, a result of the mainly unilateral communication across cultural boundaries. Such ideas have constituted part of our knowledge structure, preparing the Chinese mind for its ready acceptance of Marxism, Leninism, Mao's re-interpretation of Hegelian dialectics and, after the adoption of the open-door policy, theories of European textual revolution that have obtained their international license in the academic supermarket of North America.

Ambiguity as a particular social phenomenon regained favor in the 1990s. It is not accidental. Ten years (1979-1989) had been devoted to what is called, by the Chinese academia, 'new enlightenment.' This decade is an important historical period during which 'Mr. Democracy' and 'Mr. Science' acted as the heroes of the time and people turned a deaf ear to familiar ideological monologue. Forbidden ideas rushed in to bring to the surface all kinds of forbidden desires. With the help of poststructuralism and deconstructionism, people have come to understand that criticism against ideology is itself ideological, that humanism in the Enlightenment's sense has its own problems

and that monistic reductionism is the cognitive source of political totalitarianism. Moral idealism, a cohesive force for a nation that has worked effectively for over 2000 years, received rigorous investigation and vehement attack. Hard-liners described the new enlightenment as bourgeois liberalization with a view toward re-shaping China through an insidious peaceful evolution. Subtle debates have taken place, one after another, in which the main focus has been the cultivation of a whole new generation capable of unfamiliarizing what is supposed to have been familiar. Distancing from ideology shifts to distancing from clarity. A cognitive re-orientation starts. This tendency keeps growing, owing to the unexpected *Tien An Men* Square demonstrations. Since then, literary caricature substitutes for political outcry. Best-sellers in the early 1990s employ the officially favored techniques of realism, but create a life space in which the noble is obscene and the stupid is full of wisdom. Intellectuals portrayed by intellectuals in novels and short stories enjoy self-exposure and self-effacement. Readers cannot tell what the hero stands for, saint or devil. Hard-liners are intellectually unprepared for this new phenomenon and have to pass it over in silence. Literary critics find a golden opportunity and comparative literature becomes the academic vogue though it has fallen to a low ebb in the West. In the meanwhile, MTV provides another kind of spiritual civilization for every Chinese family. A typical Chinese music television offering is often a condensation of three elements: familiar or revolutionary music; lyrics irrelevant to the original music and sometimes ungrammatical or nonsensical; human figures, most likely sexy and half-naked ladies, who have nothing to do with the music or the words. Parallel to this pop cultural audio-visual mish mash is grand performances organized by the ideological authorities where different forms, styles, genres, themes, narrative apparatuses, stories, etc. are strung together to present a multi-oriented spectacular. Copycat performances are countless and the whole country is now burdened down with pastiched artifacts. It is a process of nationwide unfamiliarization. Nevertheless, people do not feel estranged or shocked, because what has brought about this paradigmatic mutation or sudden "rupture" are not things such as abstract paintings, poems like *The Waste Land*, nor a Derridean style of writing '*sous rature*,' but a powerful amusement industry that appeals to the common denominator and aims to get in touch the subliminal of the masses. The industry entertains people with ambiguity and makes reductionist interpretation impossible. When all this is subsumed under the master concept of Chinese socialism or spiritual civilization, propaganda itself proves to be ambiguous. Of course, ambiguity in this sense should not be taken for granted, no matter the extent to which it might have contributed to the positive re-shaping of contemporary Chinese life.

Epilogue

Structuralist anthropology and semiotics attempt to re-interpret the theory of dialectical opposition by introducing a third term, the mediator, which is somewhat different from the Hegelian synthesis we understand as familiar. Hermes, Harlequin, picaresque characters, circus clowns, tricksters, fools, madmen, the mythical hare, are some of the candidates available to act out the function of being an intermediary. Sometimes, according to the famous Japanese semiotician Masao Yamaguchi, mediation can also be carried out in the form of technique (i.e. prium). To put them all in a synchronic perspective, one can construct an archetype of ambiguous and equivocal characters that, in turn, finds expression through various images. To follow the terminology of Kantian philosophy or Saussurean linguistics, this archetype works as a special kind of transcendental subject or '*la langue*' which is logically *a priori* and constitutes a necessary condition—but not **the** necessary and sufficient condition—for the possibility of ambiguity in the form of various happenings, that is, experience or '*la parole*,' in specific temporal-spatial situations. Methodologically, archetype still remains within the dichotomy of '*la langue*' and '*la parole*.' This is an important point to make, because there is no graphic/phonetic differentiation in Chinese between *langage* and *langue*. With this in mind, we can say that a semiotics of the mediator has undeniable merits when ambiguity is treated within a relatively closed text to clarify its structural features. Focusing on an individual image in a historical situation cannot do that. The function exercised by the mediator as an archetype is also very illuminating. It helps to push back our horizons and re-construct our understanding of dialectical opposition. Given the focus of the present article, however, I find it necessary to move beyond the structuralist/semiotic boundary and enter into the area of social practices.

If we should locate the power, outside the semiotic systems where the two events I have described happen, power that "mediates subversive elements to the existing pattern of narrative, transforming the structure so that it can incorporate non-normative reality," as Masao Yamaguchi has remarked, then that power is none other than the booming industry of culture. In other words, the market economy plays the role of the mediator. Its motivation is absolutely irrational, an insatiable desire for profit, while its mechanism is well equipped with 'instrumental rationality,' as Max Weber would have it, and high-technology. Its nature is indeed ambiguous: a blend of rationality and irrationality, wisdom and stupidity, order and chaos. A semiosis of this impersonal force has yet to be investigated. Nevertheless, it is crystal-clear that ambiguity stimulated by this powerful mediator or archetype is linked in one way or another to cultural reification, commodification of knowledge, the programmed

optimization of the relationship between input and output, human alienation that hypnotizes the critical faculty of the mind, and the principle that money talks. When eclecticism or the mixing up of different code systems obscures the arbitrary distinction between God and the Devil (The Misplacement of Symbols), defamiliarizes the established myth (Neo-San Zi Jing) and provides a new grammar for the re-ordering of syntagmatic relationships, China still doesn't know what the new is and how the re-ordering will be carried out. China is only at the level of ambiguity for ambiguity's sake. 'Great fun and nothing else,' the students' response, implies a refusal to select, to choose, to judge and to criticize; an invisible hand has made and controlled everything for us. It coincides with poststructuralist celebration of the 'decenterization of the subject' and the neo-Marxist acceptance of the 'decentered totality,' as Fredric Jameson has remarked. All this meets the requirements of the market economy as an impersonal force.

If humanism were really dead, what else would be left in human life? In this sense, ambiguity cannot afford to be treated solely as an ahistorical archetype. Since the action of signs is endless, ambiguity has to be constantly exposed to critical examination in a wider context. As a cultural phenomenon, it is not innocent. Ambiguity as a re-structuring force is itself ambiguous.

Notes

1. Linguistic determinism results, as Umberto Eco points out in *The Absent Structure*, from "ontological structuralism" which, to follow Greimas' structuralist semantics, "must be put between brackets." Winfried Noth gives a brief account of their arguments in *Handbook of Semiotics*, p.196-197. But, cognitively speaking, determinism, either linguistic or economic, it seems to me, originates from a logical fallacy I have mentioned: inflating a necessary condition illegitimately into a necessary and sufficient condition by what Derrida describes as "metaphysical desire." Kant and Saussure did not make such a mistake.
2. In *Positions* (p.28) Derrida argues to the effect that it is *differance* as "the production of a system of differences" that makes the dissociation of langue and parole possible. *Differance* or *trace* thus actually explains, *a priori*, both signification through exclusion in a delimited system and diachronical movements or changes outside that system. In other words, he wishes to prove that the production of meaning is at once synchronical and diachronical, which merges into *differance* or *trace*. Of course, he will not say that this text-centered third term has replaced the Hegelian "universal subject" (the universal spirit) as the synthesizer.
3. Here I have in mind Austin's Speech Act Theory, Wittgenstein's 'language game' and its 'rule,' Foucault's 'archaeology,' Jonathan Culler's 'literary convention,' 'New Historicism' in North America and British 'Cultural Materialism.' Their ways of abstracting are very much similar to Saussure's synchronical approach to language but fail to stress that their theories are not sufficient but only necessary.

4. How all kinds of 'parole' are possible or how 'langue' is logically *a priori* is a typical Kantian question. 'Synchronical' is transcendental in the form of linguistics.
5. *Discourse, figure*, p.75. The English translation is quoted from Bill Readings' *Introducing Lyotard*, Routledge, 1991
6. The idea of the mediator as a third term and quotations from Yamaguchi are re-quoted from Imafuku, Ryuta.1988. "Masao Yamaguchi: A Hermes-Harlequin in the Field of Semiotics," *The Semiotic Web 1987*, ed. T.A. Sebeok, Mouton de Gruyter.