



Research Article

LITERARY IDEOLOGY IN EAST ASIAN WRITERS' NOBEL LECTURES

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ABSTRACT

From 2001 to 2017, 114 writers were winning the Nobel Prize, including three Japanese and two Chinese authors. Literary ideology is implied in their works, but their Nobel Lectures also express the literary ideology, which was directly or indirectly addressed in their works. They are the thoughts of national culture, East Asian culture, and the thoughts of literary characteristics and values. By different ways, the writers shared their journeys to the most prestigious literary award in the world.

Keywords: Nobel literature prize, literary ideology, East Asian writers, Nobel Lecture.

1. Alfred Bernhard Nobel (1833-1896) was a scientist, inventor, and a great businessman especially in the field of explosives. Until the final moment of his life, he had acquired 350 patents. Alfred Nobel was also a man who suffered from great grief and loneliness. As he was appalled by the 'merchant of death,' A. Nobel, stated in his will in 1895, decided to put aside most of his property to reward individuals and organizations, regardless of nationality, that contribute tremendously to humanity. According to his will, the Nobel Prize was dedicated to 5 categories: Physics, Chemistry, Medicine, Literature, and Peace. The prize was officially given out in 1901. The Nobel Prize was awarded to individuals, except Peace which can be given to organizations. The Literature Prize is awarded either to recognize a cumulative lifetime body of work or a single achievement of a writer. Until now, the Nobel Prize is still regarded as the most prestigious prize of humanity. Not only does it represent honour, glory to the individuals, but also to their nation. Therefore, it is the greatest achievement that any scientist, writer, and philanthropist can ever dream of.

Up to 2017, 114 writers were winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, including five East Asian authors. It was, **Kawabata Yasunari**, a Japanese writer, who won the prize in 1968. The prize was awarded 'for his narrative mastery, which with great sensibility expresses the essence of the Japanese mind' (The Nobel prize). The Nobel Committee cited two of his novels, *Snow Country (1935-1937, 1947)*, and *Thousand Cranes (1949-*

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1952). The second East Asian won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1994 was also a Japanese writer, **Kenzaburo Oe**, whose ‘poetic force creates an imagined world, where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today’ (The Nobel Prize). His works which won the Nobel Prize were *The Strange Work* (1957), *The Catch* (1958), *The Flaming Green Tree*, *A Personal Matter* (1964). In 2000, **Gao Xingjian** (granted French citizenship in 1998), the first Chinese and also the third East Asian writer won the Nobel Prize in Literature with his famous work *Soul Mountain* (1990). The Swedish Academy gave the prize to Gao Xingjian for his ‘oeuvre of universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity, which has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama’ (The Nobel Prize). In 2012, **Mo Yan** was the second Chinese and the fourth East Asian author to win the Nobel Prize with *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (1995), *Red Sorghum* (1998), *Sandalwood Death* (2001). The Swedish Academy said that Mo Yan is the writer ‘who with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary’ (The Nobel Prize). **Kazuo Ishiguro**, a British novelist of Japanese origin, was the fifth East Asian writer winning the Nobel. Some of his famous works are *The Remains of the Day*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *The Buried Giant*. All of Kazuo Ishiguro works were nominated for honourable awards, many were adapted into movies and TV series. The Swedish Academy describes his novels as a ‘great emotional force, has uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world’ (The Nobel Prize).

Among five East Asian writers, there were three Japanese and two Chinese writers. These are the achievements of East Asian literature, which helped bring the regional literature closer to global literature.

2. The authors’ literary ideology, first and foremost, is brilliantly expressed in their works. However, the Nobel Lectures also show perspectives and the literary ideology of the writers, which is directly or indirectly addressed in their works.

Chinese Professor Liang Yongan believed that the Nobel Lecture can be subdivided into two types: presenting literary value as William Faulkner (Nobel Prize in 1949) and presenting national culture as Yasunari Kawabata (Nobel Prize in 1968)¹. It can be said that there is also the third type of Nobel Lecture which not only focuses on typical literary value but also presents national culture. The East Asian writers’ Nobel Lectures include all three types. With unique touches, these authors focus more on why the Swedish Academy had given them the awards.

As Liang Yongan had commented, Yasunari Kawabata focused on *presenting national culture*, especially Japanese and East Asian culture. His Nobel Lecture title is ‘Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself’ (Doan Tu Huyen translated from Russian version, entitled it ‘Born from the Japanese Beauty’). According to Kenzaburo Oe, in the Japanese

¹ See Mo Yan’s Nobel Lecture: <http://vanhoanghean.com.vn/chuyen-muc-goc-nhin-van-hoa/nhung-goc-nhin-van-hoa/dien-tu-nobel-cua-mac-ngon>

language, that title ‘was at once very beautiful and vague’ and was deliberately adopted by Yasunari Kawabata himself. It can also be implied as ‘Myself of Beautiful Japan’ or ‘Myself as a part of Beautiful Japan’ or even ‘Beautiful Japan and Myself.’ Yasunari Kawabata’s lecture quoted many poems of famous Japanese priests, from Dogen (1200-1253) to Myoe (1173-1232), Ryoukan (1758-1831). The culture of Japan, according to Yasunari Kawabata, is similar to the ever-changing four seasons, representing the beauty of the countless natural sceneries and the beauty of human’s emotions. Japanese culture and spirit are also summed up in a single poetic sentence: ‘The time of the snows, of the moon, of the blossoms – then more than ever we think of our comrades’ (Yashiro Yukio). That spirit, that feeling for one’s comrades in the snow, the moonlight, under the blossoms, is also basic to the tea ceremony. A tea ceremony is a coming together in feeling, a meeting of good comrades in a good season’ (Kawabata, 1968, p.521).

In Japanese culture, there is also an asymmetrical principle, in which asymmetry is better than symmetry in describing the diversity and vastness of nature. Japanese culture is also ‘compressed to the ultimate, (...) becomes the *bonsai* dwarf garden, or the *bonseki*.’ His Nobel Lecture presents the Buddhist ideology and notions, the Nothingness and Emptiness, which were deeply and uniquely expressed in his writings. ‘This is not the nothingness or the emptiness of the West. It is rather the reverse, a universe of the spirit in which everything communicates freely with everything, transcending bounds, limitless’ (Kawabata, 1968, p.528).

When he sang of the moon, he did not think of the moon (...). The red rainbow across the sky was as the sky taking on color. The white sunlight was as the sky growing bright. Yet the empty sky, by its nature, was not something to become bright. It was not something to take on color. With a spirit like the empty sky he gives color to all the manifold scenes but not a trace remained. In such poetry was the Buddha, the manifestation of the ultimate truth.

(Yasunari Kawabata, 1968, p.534)

Obviously, through his Nobel Lecture, Kawabata depicted his world and his works with intense grief and outstanding bravery. Kenzaburo Oe commented, ‘On the one hand Kawabata identifies himself as belonging essentially to the tradition of Zen philosophy and aesthetic sensibilities pervading the classical literature of the Orient. Yet on the other he goes out of his way to differentiate emptiness as an attribute of his works from the nihilism of the West. By doing so he was wholeheartedly addressing the coming generations of mankind with whom Alfred Nobel entrusted his hope and faith’ (Kenzaburo Oe, 1994, p.936).

In his Nobel Prize Lecture in 1994, Kenzaburo Oe also spoke about Japanese culture and the literary ideology which he strived for. Kenzaburo praised Kawabata because Kawabata talked about the beauty of Japanese and Eastern culture. Kenzaburo’s lecture also revolved around present-day Japan’s culture. It was also not a coincidence that his lecture was entitled ‘Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself.’ What is the meaning of ‘the Ambiguous’? Kenzaburo said, ‘After one hundred and twenty years of modernisation since the opening of the country, present-day Japan is split between two opposite poles of

ambiguity. This ambiguity which is so powerful and penetrating that it splits both the state and its people is evident in various ways (...). The modernisation of Japan has been orientated toward learning from and imitating the West. On the other hand, the culture of modern Japan, which implied being thoroughly open to the West or at least that impeded understanding by the West' (Kenzaburo Oe, 1994, p. 937, 938, 941). The way Japan had tried to build up a modern state modelled on the west was cataclysmic. Facing that reality, Kenzaburo could not help but find a Japanese identity for himself, which was both 'decent' and 'humanist.' He wanted to become 'an Asia impregnated with everlasting poverty and a mixed-up fertility.' He learned concretely from F. Rabelais on how to use 'the laughter that subverts hierarchical relationships' and 'to seek literary methods of attaining the universal.' 'I have said I am split between the opposite poles of ambiguity characteristic of the Japanese. I have been making efforts to be cured of and restored from those pains and wounds by means of literature' (Kenzaburo Oe, 1994, p.944).

Kazuo Ishiguro, a British writer of Japanese origin, spoke of Japan's culture from a different perspective. He left Japan when he was 5 years old and had never had a chance to return ever since. Still he wrote about Japan. Japan, to him, appeared through the stories that his parents told him, through the educational aspects on how he was raised and through the books, newspaper that his Japanese relatives sent. The writer was 'busily constructing in my mind a richly detailed place called 'Japan.' The fact that I'd never physically returned to Japan during that time only served to make my own vision of the country more vivid and personal. I'm now sure that it was this feeling, that 'my' Japan was unique and at the same time terribly fragile (...). It was my wish to rebuild my Japan in fiction, to make it safe, so that I could thereafter point to a book and say: 'Yes, there's my Japan, inside there' (Kazuo Ishiguro, 2017). That is why The Royal Society of Literature commented that the topic of Kazuo Ishiguro works usually involve memory, time, and illusion.

Different from his two Japanese colleagues, Mo Yan, a Chinese writer, did not speak directly about the national identity, but about the subjects and the familiar yet very representative living space of Chinese culture, a simple, unique, and enormous culture, the one in which he was raised and nourished. The Chinese culture he expressed was through specific people that are dear and close to him, in particular, his beloved mother. She is the one who left him the unforgettable stories, memories, and lessons on how to become a decent human being. 'My mother had become part of the earth, and that when I spoke to mother earth, I was really speaking to my mother' (Mo Yan, 2012).

Chinese culture can also be seen as a fascinating storyteller at the marketplace, as local operas, or as a world filled with tales of the supernatural, historical romances, and strange and captivating stories by Pu Songling. Even as 'the tiny Northeast Gaomi Township - a microcosm of China, even of the whole world'. His 'two decades of village life was a rich source of literary material' (Mo Yan, 2012). Mo Yan regards himself as a 'storyteller,' telling tales about Chinese people and culture through history. His works

often embrace Buddhist ideology: ‘I chose this title (*Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*) because I believe that the basic tenets of the Buddhist faith represent universal knowledge and that mankind’s many disputes are utterly without meaning in the Buddhist realm. In that lofty view of the universe, the world of man is to be pitied’ (Mo Yan, 2012).

Chinese culture, as well as Eastern culture, not only is the inspiration and the reflected subjects in Mo Yan’s works, but also suggested him writing ideas: ‘My early work can be characterized as a series of soliloquies, with no reader in mind; starting with this novel (*Sandalwood Death*, BTQN), however, I visualized myself standing in a public square spiritedly telling my story to a crowd of listeners. This tradition is a worldwide phenomenon in fiction but is especially so in China. At one time, I was a diligent student of Western modernist fiction, and I experimented with all sorts of narrative styles. But in the end, I came back to my traditions. To be sure, this return was not without its modifications’ (Mo Yan, 2012).

Regarding national culture and Eastern culture, the writers have illustrated both directly, deeply the world they are living in which greatly impacted their creations. The authors are the representatives and the voices of their cultures. By writings, they depicted, preserved, and debated the characteristics of the cultures in order to connect the world, to connect human beings. Therefore, although the characters and figures in their works are ordinary, their ideology and social matter are remarkable. Their Nobel Lectures are not only about national culture, but they also involved global culture in the multicultural world. Literature connects people for sharing, understanding, and learning mutually. That is the way literature becomes culture.

Nobel Lectures also express writers’ ideology on literature characteristics and values.

Firstly, as regards the writer’s characteristics, Gao Xingjian believed that ‘Literature can only be the voice of the individual. (...) In order that literature safeguard the reason for its own existence (...), it must return to the voice of the individual (...). Controversies about literary trends or a writer’s political inclinations were serious afflictions that tormented literature during the past century’ (Gao Xingjian, 2000, p.1037). This notion is strongly repeated many times in Gao Xingjian’s Nobel Lecture: ‘Talking to oneself is the starting point of literature’; ‘Literature is inherently man’s affirmation of the value of his own self and that this is validated during the writing’; ‘Freedom in writing becomes from an inner need in the writer himself.’ In order to make literature itself, writers’ words must reach the eternity. Gao Xingjian emphasised the ‘I’ of writer, saying that, ‘Borrowing from Descartes, it could be said of the writer: I say and therefore I am. However, the I of the writer can be the writer himself, can be equated to the narrator, or become the characters of a work. It is during the process of searching for his own narrative method that the writer gives concrete form to his perceptions (Gao Xingjian, 2000, p.1038, 1048, 1050). As a Chinese French writer, Gao Xingjian also mentioned complex and delicate issues: the relationship between literature and politics. He was at times confused and contradictory to himself when mentioning this. On one hand, he said ‘writing with no thought of utility... is

the ground of literature.’ On the other hand, he claimed, “This is not to say that literature must therefore divorced from politics or that it must necessarily be involved in politics” (Gao Xingjian, 2000, p.1037, 1049).

Still about the writer’s characteristics, Mo Yan regards himself as a ‘storyteller’ as the title of his Nobel Lecture. Mo Yan has created his own literary domain - the Northeast Gaomi Township. He wrote his own stories in his own way. He also wrote about his relatives. ‘They waited expectantly for me to tell their stories. My grandfather and grandmother, my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, my aunts and uncles, my wife and my daughter have all appeared in my stories. Even unrelated residents of Northeast Gaomi Township have made cameo appearances. Of course, they have undergone literary modification to transform them into larger-than-life fictional characters’ (Mo Yan, 2012). According to Mo Yan, ‘whether the source of a work is a dream or real life, only if it is integrated with individual experience can it be imbued with individuality, be populated with typical characters molded by lively detail, employ richly evocative language, and boast a well-crafted structure’ (Mo Yan, 2012). Mo Yan did not avoid mentioning the relationship between writers and politics. Regarding this issue, his lecture seems to be a dialogue to Gao Xingjian’s: ‘As a member of society, a novelist is entitled to his own stance and viewpoint; but when he is writing he must take a humanistic stance, and write accordingly. Only then can literature not just originate in events, but transcend them, not just show concern for politics but be greater than politics’ (Mo Yan, 2012).

Kazuo Ishiguro (2017) also talked about his personal characteristic in his works. ‘I’d often written about such individuals struggling between forgetting and remembering.’ His works therefore bring up bigger matter in the range of nation and humanity. ‘Does a nation remember and forget in much the same way as an individual does? Or are there important differences? What exactly are the memories of a nation? Where are they kept? How are they shaped and controlled? Are there times when forgetting is the only way to stop cycles of violence, or to stop a society disintegrating into chaos or war? On the other hand, can stable, free nations really be built on foundations of wilful amnesia and frustrated justice? I heard myself telling the questioner that I wanted to find a way to write about these things, but that for the moment, unfortunately, I couldn’t think how I’d do it’. Kazuo Ishiguro chose his own way to write: ‘What if I stopped worrying about my characters and worried instead about my relationships? (...) I thought about E.M. Forster’s famous distinction between three-dimensional and two-dimensional characters. A character in a story became three-dimensional, he’d said, by virtue of the fact that they ‘surprised us convincingly’. It was in so doing they became rounded’. Kazuo Ishiguro shared the experience that led him to success: ‘all good stories, never mind how radical or traditional their mode of telling, had to contain relationships that are important to us; that move us, amuse us, anger us, surprise us. Perhaps in future, if I attended more to my relationships, my characters would take care of themselves’.

Nobel Lectures of East Asian writers also mentioned *literature characteristics and values*.

According to Gao Xingjian, literature value is ‘discovering and revealing what is rarely known, little known, thought to be known but in fact not very well known of the truth of the human world. It would seem that truth is the unassailable and most basic quality of literature (...). It is a writer’s insights in grasping truth that determine the quality of a work, and word games or writing techniques cannot serve as substitutes.’ The truth here is not only the writer’s attitude towards writing and the works’ value but also the ethics of writers and ethics of literature. ‘In the hands of a writer with a serious attitude to writing even literary fabrications are premised on the portrayal of the truth of human life, and this has been the vital life force of works that have endured from ancient times to the present’ (Gao Xingjian, 2000, p.1045, 1047). Mo Yan (2012) also shared his point of view: ‘Literature does not simply make a replica of reality but penetrates the surface layers and reaches deep into the inner workings of reality; it removes false illusions, looks down from great heights at ordinary happenings, and with a broad perspective reveals happenings in their entirety’. In this sense, literature fills in the gaps of history and history is not all that humankind possesses, there is also the legacy of literature. Such literary works could not be subverted and destroyed.

Kenzaburo Oe emphasised the universality and humanism and writers’ responsibility. ‘As someone influenced by Watanabe’s humanism, I wish my task as a novelist to enable both those who express themselves with words and their readers to recover from their own sufferings and the sufferings of their time, and to cure their souls of the wounds. I have said I am split between the opposite poles of ambiguity characteristic of the Japanese. I have been making efforts to be cured of and restored from those pains and wounds by means of literature’ (Kenzaburo Oe, 1994, p.944). Kenzaburo Oe strongly believes in the power of art in healing pains.

As masters of language, in their Nobel Lectures, the writers paid close attention to language. Mo Yan pointed out the diversity and variation of language. Gao Xingjian emphasised the magic of the language of literature. He said ‘The art of language lies in the presenter being able to convey his feelings to others, it is not some sign system or semantic structure requiring nothing more than grammatical structures. If the living person behind language is forgotten, semantic expositions easily turn into games of the intellect (...). Language is not merely concepts and the carrier of concepts, it simultaneously activates the feelings and the senses and this is why signs and signals cannot replace the language of living people’ (2000, p.1047, 1048). The duty of writers is to explore and exploit the hidden potential of language.

There is also a point worth noting in Nobel Lectures that writers always expect literature to become more diverse. This notion can be quoted from Kazuo Ishiguro’s Nobel Lecture. According to Ishiguro (2017), firstly, we have to ‘widen our common literary world to include many more voices and cultures’, especially unknown literary cultures.

Secondly, we “not set too narrowly or conservatively our definitions of what constitutes good literature (...). The next generation will come with all sorts of new ways to tell important and wonderful stories. We must keep our minds open to them, especially regarding genre and form, so that we can nurture and celebrate the best of them (...). We may even find a new idea, a great humane vision, around which to rally” (Ishiguro, 2017).

3. From the East Asian writers’ Nobel Lectures, it can be delivered some conclusions:

Firstly, either directly or indirectly, the writers expressed deeply their viewpoints about their national and Eastern culture. They stood on ‘the Shoulders of Giants,’ which is the national and Eastern culture with their identities, their strengths and shortcomings, so as to write about the people, the feelings, even the fate of those cultures and to bridge the gaps between the East and the West. On the other hand, they do not seclude themselves in those cultures but open to the multicultural world each with their way in order to receive great ideology and methods of expressing humanity’s culture and literature.

Secondly, the writers paid special attention to their unique individuality. Those individualities are proven through their literary ideology, their interests, ‘literary domain’, and through their distinctive techniques. The writers always take notice of what is dear to them, what they experienced, what moved them and try their best to express these things in their creations. Those can be ‘the small and the private’ but they hold within them the meaning and the stature of humanity. The writers’ freedom of writing can be seen in various ways, but for them, it is first and foremost ‘an inner need in the writer himself,’ not forced, also the freedom of writing cannot go against the ideals, the progress of society.

Thirdly, the writers always bear in minds the responsibilities as well as the nobility of literature and themselves. Literature is always synonymous with exploring and explaining reality through its multi-dimensional view. Literature has to be aesthetically pleasing, fictional, and imaginative, but the fiction and the imagination in literature also explain and explore the deepest part of life. Literature shares and heals the wounds of the souls and reconciles humanity.

Fourthly, the language of literature has to embody the magic, has to be diverse with boundless expressive capacity in order to create great impacts on human feelings and senses. Only then will the language of literature can be disseminated.

Fifthly, it is essential to have more open-minded approaches about literature so the world can have a greater understanding of literature, culture which is still unknown and to define a piece of writing or to keep up with the progress of humanity civilisation, especially the new genres and forms which the younger writers will bring upon in the future.

The ideology in the writers’ Nobel Prize, obviously, is also the specification of the Nobel Prize’s ideology – to create what is best for humanity.

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TƯ TƯỞNG VĂN HỌC TRONG DIỄN TỪ NHẬN GIẢI NOBEL CỦA CÁC NHÀ VĂN ĐÔNG Á VÀ GỐC ĐÔNG Á

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TÓM TẮT

Từ năm 2001 đến 2017, đã có 114 nhà văn đạt giải Nobel, trong đó có 5 nhà văn Đông Á hoặc gốc Đông Á. Tư tưởng văn học được các tác giả thể hiện tinh túy trong tác phẩm, tuy nhiên diễn từ nhận giải Nobel cũng thể hiện những điều họ đã thể hiện hoặc chưa trực tiếp nói ra trong tác phẩm. Đó là những tư tưởng về văn hóa dân tộc, văn hóa khu vực Đông Á, về đặc điểm và giá trị của văn học; từ đó, bằng những cách khác nhau, các nhà văn đã tâm sự về con đường dẫn họ tới giải thưởng văn học danh giá nhất hành tinh.

Từ khóa: giải Nobel văn học, nhà văn Đông Á, gốc Đông Á, diễn từ giải Nobel.