



Working Papers

A FAIRY TALE OF SCIENCE:

Playing with Hayward Alker

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The New School, New York

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Presentation prepared for the Memorial Conference in Honor of Hayward R. Alker, Jr.,
Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, 6-7 June 2008

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ABSTRACT

This paper, presented at the Memorial Conference in Honor of Hayward R. Alker, Jr., combines three of Alker's abiding interests in modeling world politics: dialogics as method, world civilizations as substance, and dramaturgy as form. In the form of a play, the paper explores a central theme in Alker's scholarship: e.g., how do we understand and communicate with each other when civilizations have such different understandings of what the world is and how we relate to it?

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This paper will combine three of Hayward Alker's abiding interests in modeling world politics: dialogics as method, world civilizations as substance, and dramaturgy as form.¹ A play, this paper will inquire into a central theme in Alker's scholarship: e.g., how do we understand and communicate with each other when civilizations have such different understandings of what the world is and how we relate to it?

CAST LIST (in order of appearance)

Hồ Xuân Hu'o'ng.....18th-century poet from Vietnam famous for her feminist satires of patriarchy.²
She is small of stature and dressed in the white, flowing silks of Annam.

Thomas Kuhn.....20th-century philosopher of science from the US famous for his theory of paradigm shift.³
He is dressed in the ubiquitous uniform of US intellectuals of his time and rank: a white, long-sleeved shirt, buttoned to the neck, and khaki pants with loafers.

¹ I am indebted to Patricia Robertson and Gwendolyn Alker for helping me with the structure and tone of this play. Many thanks, also, to Lucy Duddy, Gavan Duffy, Zac Hall, Henry Mecredy, Everita Silina, and Hong Anh Thi Vu for their respective contributions. Nonetheless, I retain all responsibility for the contents herein.

² Cf. Balaban, John (trans.) (2000) *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hu'o'ng*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press.

³ Kuhn, Thomas. (1962) *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Su Shi.....11th-century Han poet-official of the Song Dynasty famous for his poetry, calligraphy, painting, and irreverent, playful attitudes.⁴ Also well-known for liking wine. He is dressed in a simple scholar's attire of his time and rank.
- Michel Foucault.....20th-century philosopher of social theory from France famous for his theory of "governmentality."⁵ He has a shaved head, square glasses, and wears the European intellectual's uniform: black turtleneck over black corduroys.
- Karl Marx.....19th-century critical theorist, historian, and political agitator originally from Germany later relocated to England, famous for his theories of capitalism, history, and revolution.⁶ His formidable forehead is topped with full, wiry hair merging with his full, wiry beard. He is dressed in a waistcoat with trousers, a monocle dangles from his neck.
- Frantz Fanon.....20th-century psychiatrist and writer originally from Martinique famous for work on the psychopathology of colonialism.⁷ He wears a tan-colored, linen suit with an impeccably white, cotton shirt and classic Oxfords.

⁴ Cf. Egan, Ronald C. (1994) *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

⁵ Foucault, Michel. (1994) *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*. New York: The New Press.

⁶ Cf. Tucker, Robert C. (ed.) (1978) *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd Edition. New York: W.W. Norton.

⁷ Fanon, Frantz. (1965) *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Macgibbon and Kee;

We are in the Mystical Realm. Hô Xuân Hu'o'ng sits on a stone bench under a weeping willow by a bubbling brook. She's reading a book, Rediscoveries and Reformulations, by Hayward Alker.⁸ It is open to one chapter in particular, "Fairy Tales, Tragedies, and World Histories: Testable Structuralist Interpretations."⁹ She sighs.

Hô (*puts down her book*): What is he talking about...?

Kuhn (*happens by*): What's wrong, little one?

Hô (*arches him a look but decides to ignore his patronizing tone*): This book, brother Kuhn, I just don't understand it.

Kuhn: Maybe I can help. (*He smiles.*) I was, you know, a well-known philosopher of science in my time. (*Hô nods politely. She's heard it many times before.*) Why are you reading this?

Hô: The title intrigues me. Being a poet myself – and a feminist one at that – I love fairy tales and tragedies. I'm also fascinated by their connection to world history. My people lived with one imperial power, China, for centuries and another, colonial France, for almost sixty years. So I am highly sensitive to the matter of power and oppression. As one of our leading poets said: "*Fuck you base traitors who dare laugh at me!*"¹⁰

(*Kuhn stiffens with surprise. He didn't expect such vehemence from this "delicate thing."* Hô senses his discomfort and explains.)

⁸ Alker, Hayward R. (1996) *Rediscoveries and Reformulations: Humanistic Methodologies for International Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 267-302.

¹⁰ Nguyen, Huu Huan. (1996) "Carrying a Cangue Around the Neck." In Huynh Sanh Thong (ed.), *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems: From the Eleventh through the Twentieth Centuries*, p. 84. New Haven: Yale University Press.

This was the last line of a poem written by Nguyen Huu Huan. He was a leader of the resistance movement against the French in the South. He was yoked around town with a canque around his neck, and wrote this poem in protest. Upon finishing it, he committed suicide by biting his tongue. He died in 1875, eight years after the French occupied the South, then known as Cochin China.

(While Hô is speaking, a large screen behind them is flashing images of Vietnam in the 1800s: the royal family, the French legation, the student protestors.)

Kuhn: Oh, I see. We knew so little about Vietnam then...

(The screen now shows pictures of US troops in Vietnam, tanks and helicopters and napalm being dropped, countless body bags, massive demonstrations at home, the Paris Peace Accords. Kuhn rouses himself and peers into the book lying open on Hô's lap.)

What do you find so troublesome?

Hô: I understand that he's trying to find the deep, underlying structures – what he calls “story grammars” – to dominant myths in world civilizations.¹¹ His goal, I think, is to detect where these myths might intersect, so we could strengthen communication and understanding across civilizations, and where they might clash or bypass one another, so we could identify and prevent

¹¹ “Focusing on narrative scripts and their underlying plots and associated transformational grammars not only helps reconstitute international relations within the dialectical-hermeneutic tradition as a reconstructive but fallible science of human possibilities, it also reasserts that concept of scientific international theory which grounds itself in practical striving toward world community” (*Ibid.*, p. 273).

conflicts or cross-purposes from exploding.¹² (*Kuhn nods sagely. Not bad, he thinks.*) But sentences like these bewilder me (*she reads out loud*):

“Recall that Mandler and Johnson distinguished external and internal states. Similarly, Lehnert starts from a gross taxonomy of external events positively or negatively evaluated by a particular actor (symbolized + or – respectively), and distinguishes all of these from internal mental states (symbolized by M's) which can be goals, perceptions or other cognitions...”¹³

And he has all these fancy charts with arrows and dashes going this way and that, annotated with all sorts of Greek letters. Then he writes (*she reads further*):

“Not to get lost in the details (*Ha!, she exclaims*), some of which are suggested by the content and notation of these two figures, the main thrust of the rewrite rules involved is to elaborate the basic tragic plot sentence into a twelve-sentence-long basic plot type (at the middle of Figure 8.4), and then to delete and complete these sentence forms to give the concrete particulars of self-annihilation characterizing a particular plot...”¹⁴

As children from your time like to declare: “Say what?!”

Kuhn (*sits down next to Hô*): Look here (*he points to a passage in her book and reads aloud*):

“If scientific history writing is thus admitted to be a poetic, fictional activity, the mimetic character of fiction must be emphasized as applying to scientific

¹² “[M]easuring actual historical sequences and thinking of possible world historical developments in terms of alternative story grammars can enlighten and orient us toward a better future of constrained, but multiple possibilities” (*Ibid.*, 302).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

history as well. Mimesis is a metaphoric or 'iconic augmentation of the real', imitating not the effectivity of events, but their logical structure and meaning. Tragic mimesis (or what Frye would call the high mimetic mode) seeks, as Aristotle said, to represent human action in a magnified way. Thus the world of fiction leads us to the essential heart of the real world of action by playing the unreal, while true histories of the past open up buried potentialities of the present or future..."¹⁵

He's saying something similar to what I wrote about and that is, science is not always so "scientific." It is a human and therefore social endeavor. For this reason, "science" could be a kind of inspired, creative storytelling, just as "fiction" could dramatize the truths at the heart of "science." A common structure of meaning and logic binds them. So where "science" fails to explain, "fiction" could be used to augment or illustrate. By studying the "story grammar" of fiction, especially if it's iconic in some way, we can get at an underlying logic that accounts for reality.

Hô (*admiringly*): There is great wisdom here, not just scholarship. I have a question, though. Is storytelling only "mimetic"...?

Su (*happens to pass by, with his usual gourd of wine tied around his waist*): Storytelling! My favorite subject. What are we talking about, brother and sister?

Kuhn (*a little irritated by the interruption*): Hello, brother Su. I see you are in fine form as usual (*nodding to Su's gourd*).

Su (*happily holding up his gourd*): We're in the great Beyond, remember? Now, what's the discussion of the day? (*He sits down on the bench next to Hô's free side. She is sandwiched between Kuhn and Su. She feels a little cramped.*)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

Kuhn: We were discussing the distinctions, real or false, between “science” and “fiction.” (*Su pulls on his beard thoughtfully.*) If you remember (*Kuhn steals a look at Hô*), I argued in my book that what most people consider to be “science” is really just a convention, a norm. But once a series of inexplicable incidents or anomalies arise – like why the stars move this way and not that or how certain chemicals glow in the dark – then this “normal science” begins to undergo serious questioning and challenges. Those trained in “normal science” try to deal with these anomalies by piling one *ad hoc* explanation after another until the whole intellectual enterprise collapses! (*Kuhn gestures excitedly.*) Then somebody has a dream or some sort of hallucination and, suddenly, we have a “paradigm shift.” We see the world in a new light and a scientific revolution begins. But this paradigm shift (*Kuhn resumes his usual restrained demeanor*) doesn’t occur easily, nor should it, since rigor is needed for scientific progress. Usually, a paradigm shift succeeds only when one generation of normal scientists die – it’s what I call “cohort replacement.” A new generation of thinkers can then take over.

Hô: Must it be so drastic...?

Su (*enthusiastically*): As I once wrote (*he recites while pacing back and forth, arms behind his back, head turned skyward*):

“...Water is at the juncture of existence and non-existence. It is what is present just as you leave non-existence and enter into existence. Laozi understood this. That is why he said, ‘The highest goodness is like water’ and ‘Water is closest to the Way.’ As for the virtue of the sage, although it can be named and described, it is not fixed in any single thing, just like water which does not have any constant form. This is the highest kind of goodness and the closest to the Way. Yet it is not the Way. Now, before water is generated, when the *yin* and *yang* have not yet mingled, there is a vast emptiness which contains no

thing. But you cannot say there is nothing. This is truly the resemblance of the Way.”¹⁶

(*Su bows humbly.*)

Kuhn: Say what?

Hô (*quickly*): What brother Su means is that knowledge, like water, cannot be prescribed by a sage or containable in any way. If it is, then it's not real knowledge. It becomes a formality only.

Kuhn: That may be the case but knowledge is also a social product. It doesn't exist on its own...

Su: I agree, brother Kuhn! But the sociality of knowledge is not limited to human artifice. Nature plays a role, too. Whether water flows or does not flow nearby affect us. For example, Nature reminds us that knowledge is not flat or one-sided, but alive and active and a constant source of wisdom! As I inscribed once on the Wall of West Forest Monastery:

“From the side it's a mountain wall,
From the end a single peak,
Near, far, high, low—
Each view is different.”¹⁷

(*Su takes a swig of his gourd.*)

Foucault (*walks by*): Aren't you forgetting about power and politics, *mon ami*?

¹⁶ Su Shi quoted in Egan, *op.cit.*, p. 74.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

Hô (*pointing to her book*): Yes, that's what got me interested in...

Su: Of course not, brother Foucault! Knowledge may grant privilege but power is what ensures it. I knew this intimately as a governor in my time. Note this poem I wrote sometime during the reign of Emperor Shenzong of the Northern Song¹⁸
(*Su again paces as he recites*):

New Year's Eve, I should go home early
But official duties keep me behind.
Holding my brush, I face them with tears,
Grieved for these prisoners in chains.
Petty men, looking for some food,
Fell into the net, knowing no shame.
I, too, cling to my meager salary
Continuously missing chances to retire.
Don't talk of noble and base,
Each of us schemes for a meal.
Who could set them free for a time?
I am silent, humiliated before the ancients.¹⁹

(*Su takes a soulful swig of his gourd.*)

Kuhn (*absent-mindedly*): Ya "gotta serve somebody."²⁰

Foucault: *Pardon?*

Kuhn: Oh, sorry. It's the title of a song from a 20th-century singer-songwriter named Bob Dylan. Brother Su's poem reminded me of it.

¹⁸ 1065-1085 AD.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

²⁰ For the lyrics, see (<http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/serve.html>).

Foucault: Ah, yes, *Dee-lang!* I liked him, too. But back to our discussion: the relationship between power and knowledge operates on many levels, each sustaining the other. Take my discourse on sexuality, for instance, or prisons or madness. Each demonstrates how society controls our minds in order to serve its purposes. All the norms, values, and institutions we take for granted, for instance, reflect the social order. Society's rulers need to repress our natural sensibilities, desires, and aspirations to rule over us.

Hô: But is power always punitive and restrictive...?

Su: You know, brothers and sister, all this talk of knowledge and sensibilities and desires is making me hungry! Let's have some replenishment.

(He snaps his fingers. A table magically appears. On it is a variety of foods and fruits, cakes and sweets. Jugs of wine liberally dot the table. All sit down at the table and begin feasting.)

Hô turns to the audience, revealing her thoughts:

Good thing we're in the Mystical Realm. Otherwise, *I'd* have to make all this food. Or some manservant. Who else would go to market and haul the many baskets of meats and vegetables, seafood and spices, milk and cream, grains, beans, noodles, flour, and fruits back to wash, dry, separate, layer, chop, dice, slice, and mince so it could be marinaded, boiled, broiled, baked, or fried, served on a platter or bowl, big or small, with knife, fork, spoon, or chopsticks?

Hô shudders.

I'd never have time for my own philosophical or poetic meanderings even though [*she glances at her brothers merrily eating and drinking*] no one pays attention to them anyway. Never mind.

(She rejoins the gathering.)

Foucault (*munching*): As I was saying...

Hô: Could we return to...

Su (*hailing offstage*): Brother Marx! Brother Fanon! Come join us in this fascinating discussion!

(Marx and Fanon enter.)

Marx: What are we celebrating?

(Hô suddenly remembers something, she turns to the audience again:

All my sister spirits are at the "Celebration of Lights"! No wonder they're not here. The Celebration is an annual appreciation of and commitment to community. Everyone dresses in white robes. We stand under the lush, green leaves of a giant fig tree and hold hands in a circle. Small, lit candles form a ring inside our circle and we sing a lyrical song of birth. Men are welcome and many do participate but most tend to stay away. Too sentimental, they grump. No wonder...[*she looks around drily.*] But [*she brightens*] if we finish early here, I can still make it to the celebration on time.

(She looks at Su who continues to exuberate.)

Su: Life! Knowledge! Power!

Fanon (*sits at the table*): Rich topics, indeed. (*He pours himself a glass of wine.*)

Marx (*reaching for a piece of cake*): I hope you've brought up who's doing all the labor in this production of life, knowledge, and power. And why certain types of production are valued over others.

Foucault: Knowledge and power...

Marx (*impatiently*): *Ya, ya*, brother Foucault. We've had this discussion many times before. Your understanding of knowledge and power, however, is curiously devoid of any relation to production in the real sense. For you, knowledge and power somehow just "appear." No economies or labor or profits and loss are involved. You engage in endless analytical deconstructions as if these lead to some sort of resistance or change, all the while enjoying your various bourgeois comforts. You don't theorize *why* structures of power and knowledge take on the characteristics that they do and benefit certain classes while exploiting others.

Hô: Not to mention how patriarchy –

Fanon (*peering over his small, round spectacles*): Your greatest oversight, brother Foucault, is on the issue of *colonialisme*. (*Foucault shrugs Gallically.*) After all, what *kind* of power and knowledge is produced by capitalist states and their armies? And when you talk about sexuality and prisons and madness do you ever consider their applications to people who don't look like you but who polish your shoes, fight your wars, work your mines, harvest your plantations –

Hô (*adds*): Or cook your food, wash your clothes, raise your babies, *give* you babies –

Fanon: – and then you label them “promiscuous,” “venal,” and “mad”?

Hô: Not to mention “dragon ladies” or “hysterical” –

Marx (*raising his fist*): Workers of the World Unite!

Hô (*teasingly*): For dinner? (*Hô chuckles but no response from the others. In fact, everyone is turned towards Marx and Fanon, contemplating their comments. She turns to the audience again:*

Typical! Men always ignore gender issues whenever they’re raised. As if men have nothing to do with gender. As if women have babies all on their own. As if patriarchy and discrimination and abuse and rape all happen without men! As if!

At least I have myself [*defiantly*]:

My body is both white and round,
In water I may sink or swim.
The hand that kneads me may be rough –
I still shall keep my true-red heart.²¹

(*She feels slightly better.*)

Hô (*speaking a little louder*): Gentlemen, let’s not gang up against brother Foucault. Our discussion started with trying to understand the relationship between “science” and “fiction”...

²¹ Hô Xuân Hu’o’ng. (1996) “The Cake-That-Drifts-In-Water.” In Huynh, *op.cit.*, p. 212.

Marx: Who's ganging up against whom? The bourgeoisie – especially professors – are always the best dodgers. They're the first to complain about "oppression" or "control" yet never willing to recognize their complicity with it. Or (*pauses dramatically*), their own desire for it!

Fanon (*sipping his wine most elegantly*): That's why I called for the "native" to kill his colonial master, the "settler." Only then could the "native" become a true man. (*Hô shudders.*)

Foucault (*beginning to sneer*): You revolutionaries are all alike. You never realize that power can operate indirectly and subtly, with layers functioning not just vertically but also horizontally. Power can be a kind of web that extends throughout society. "Truth" and "knowledge" are disciplined *before* any direct orders are given or received²² –

Hô: But what if...

Marx: *Ach*, enough of this precious prattle! Come, brother Fanon, let's go elsewhere and plot. (*Marx and Fanon exit.*)

Hô (*turns around and sees Su snoring in a corner. Kuhn and Foucault have drifted off elsewhere, deep in conversation. She's left by herself. She half-laughs.*) I guess I'm where I started. (*She rails.*)

I rage against my fate – a fruit too ripe.
Talented men of letters, where are you?
Am I condemned to shrivel up and rot?²³

(*The fairy Disillusion appears.*)

²² Many thanks to Everita Silina for this reminder.

²³ Hô Xuân Hu'o'ng (1996), "Confession," *Ibid.* , p. 213.

Fairy Disillusion: Sister Hô, aren't you going to the Celebration?

Hô (*looks down*): I guess...

Fairy Disillusion (*kindly*): What's wrong?

Hô: Well, I was pondering this question, when all these brothers stopped by, and we had a great, roaring discussion, examining this, arguing that. But, in the end, it was all about what *they* were interested in and on *their* terms. My question got lost in the fray. I couldn't even get in a word edgewise. Then they either fell asleep or left. (*She gestures toward the empty table.*)

Fairy Disillusion (*smiling*): Men tend to do that, don't they? What was your question?

Hô: Is fiction only "mimetic" of reality and science always "true"?

Fairy Disillusion: Why do you ask?

Hô: It seems to me that fiction can also shape reality – otherwise, how do we know what we know if not through the stories, myths, fables, and legends that parents tell their children? Science must come from somewhere. It didn't pop out of nothing.

Fairy Disillusion: But isn't the purpose of science to rid knowledge of subjective "noise" so we can discover reality's "truths"?

Hô: Where do these definitions come from, though, if not from some story we tell ourselves about what's "real" and what's "illusion"? And how do we know where to draw the line, if one even exists?

Fairy Disillusion (*laughing*): I can't disagree with you there. Still, how do we know what's "valuable," if each story has the same "truth" as another and there are so many of them out there?

Hô: Maybe one way to gauge the value of a story – whether we call it "knowledge" or "science" – is by asking questions. That is, what does this story *mean* and to whom? This requires that each of us has the opportunity to tell *our* story on *our* terms. Brother Marx and brother Fanon rightly point out the structural and cultural inequities that privilege a few to speak at the expense of the many. Only by correcting these imbalances could we make sure that each story is *heard*, not just tolerated, so that action can take place to change things. We can't simply *critique* endlessly.

But they are wrong to be so violent about change. One cannot deny brother Foucault's insight that power and knowledge operate everywhere, at every level. So the idea that "revolution" could bring about a complete break, as in brother Kuhn's "cohort replacement," where one generation must die before another could think differently, or brother Marx's "proletarian revolution," where one class replaces another totally, or brother Fanon's call to violence, where the colonized kills the colonizer to cleanse both of colonialism – none of these proposals work! (*Hô shakes her head.*)

Fairy Disillusion: Why not?

Hô: World histories from the French Revolution to the Cultural Revolution to the Neoliberal Revolution have shown that the kind of severity required by these revolutions – that is, the cutting of the past to forge the future – merely allows violence and abuses to continue in the present. So we end up with more of the same! And where's the revolution in that??

(She pauses, then resumes quietly.)

On these occasions, I think of brother Nguyen, the poet-revolutionary who died by biting his tongue. Yes, my people won freedom from the Chinese and the French and later the Americans, and these were significant victories. But the regime that came into power had its good points and its bad points, like any government. Was it worth the sacrifice then? *(She makes a mental note.)* I must discuss this with brother Nguyen next time I bump into him.

Fairy Disillusion: What to do, then?

Hô: We need to recognize that, by now, all our stories are connected! Each has elements of the others in it. We may find differences among our stories but there isn't one that is innately more "complete" or "worthy" or "superior" than the others. We need to recognize this not because it's nice or fair or moral but because our stories wouldn't make sense otherwise! And keeping *that* fiction would only drive us crazy – which usually spills out in the form of violence.

I agree with brother Su that knowledge is like water. It is an organic force full of life and action and impact! Therein lies its politics. To truly benefit from all these stories, we need to do what this book suggests (*Hô points to Alker's book, which she is still holding*): that is, recognize all those areas of intersecting sameness as well as profound differences. In working out and sorting through these areas, we not only alter our own stories but also produce new ones together. These new stories will lessen the distances and hatreds and misunderstandings among us. These may never disappear but at least they won't loom so large. Maybe then, we'd have a chance to pause, to breathe, to recover, to reflect – even to dream! Only when this is underway could the hard

work of building begin for another day for another generation. In renewing our stories, then, we renew ourselves.²⁴

Fairy Disillusion: Sounds like you're ready for the Celebration of Lights!

Hô (*happily*): Yes, I am.

(Before she exits, Hô puts down Rediscoveries and Reformulations on the stone bench.)

Thank you, Professor Aker. You were difficult to understand at times but it was worth the effort. You challenged us to relate art to science, fairy tales to world cultures, and theory-building to community-building. It's a great beginning. Who knows? Enlightenment may come to world politics, after all!

(Hô and Disillusion float off. Stage dims. Curtains down.)

THE END

²⁴ For an academic elaboration of this argument, see Agathangelou, Anna M. and Ling, L.H.M. (forthcoming) *Transforming World Politics: From Empire to Multiple Worlds*. London: Routledge.