

April 21, 1995
Mr. Alan Strojin
Human Rights Officer
Ontario Human Rights Commission
110 King St. West, Suite 310
Hamilton, Ontario L8P 4S6

Dear Mr. Strojin:

It has taken me a while to go over the materials you sent, including the recent fax, and try to sort out the issues and evaluate the paper so as to be able to write you. I think I'm now ready to do these.

At the beginning, when I thought it was simply a matter of assessing the paper and saying what I thought a fair grade would be, - the matter seemed fairly straightforward. Of course the basic Issue is still that. But some knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the paper and the grade certainty complicates the matter, Let me say that I still understand my role as primarily saying what I think a fair grade for the paper would be, and you can compare that with the grade the student actually received and draw whatever conclusions you will. But I do want also to comment a bit on the student's written response to the professor's paper, as (she? I believe you once identified her as a woman) stated it in the excerpts from (her?) submissions to your Commission. Let me use S for student and P for professor.

Crucial to the matter is, I believe, the fact that S still has some problems with reading and writing English, in spite of having attained an admirable degree of proficiency for a non-native user; I believe also that S is not sufficiently aware of these problems, and attempts complex interpretations and judgements that are consequently not always sound. S writes things in the submission that don't make much sense, and quotes P as saying things I can't imagine he did, since they also don't make sense. I believe that S failed to understand thoroughly the complicated and difficult arguments that P made in his paper. S makes various factual mistakes, seeming to claim more grasp of the subject than she has. For example, S writes of "the famous German scholar Schapiro" (he is the famous American scholar Meyer Schapiro); his being German" is associated with "the most influential theories of art history* having been formulated in Germany in the 1920s and 30s, and eventually with the Nazi racism" that S finds.

P's paper is admittedly complex and sophisticated, hard to understand, but no one who cannot completely understand it should

attempt the judgements and criticisms that S makes. I don't know myself how I would have responded to these criticisms if I were P; one can't simply say "Sorry, your mastery of English isn't sufficient for you to grasp completely what I've written." P uses ironic and rhetorical devices, e.g. about Adam and Eve making the "first aesthetic response in history," p. 6; S takes these as serious arguments, and uses them in making her extraordinary charges about "Nazi racist theory etc. I would suspect a certain malice behind S's misreadings—something may have gone wrong personally between the two? But of course I don't know enough to judge the truth of that conjecture.

As for S's paper: it is a very ambitious piece of work, with notable strengths; a good mind is clearly at work here. Good points are made, and valuable insights expressed. The main problem with it, no doubt from P's viewpoint and, I think, from the viewpoint of anyone who has had a lot of experience in teaching subjects in Chinese culture to Chinese students (among others), is the basic assumption that the truth about any matter can be found in old Chinese texts, if only one can find it and interpret it; also that everything important in Chinese culture has a strong underpinning in Chinese philosophy. S writes (p. 8) of the tight corresponding relationships between ancient Chinese thought and classic art history. This may sound unobjectionable enough; but it pushes the writer always in the direction of a certain kind of interpretation that has been endlessly done by Chinese writers, while art history as practiced elsewhere goes in very different directions. (Specialists in ancient Greek art don't limit themselves to interpretations based in ancient Greek philosophy; they introduce elements of social and economic and political and other history in defining the factors surrounding artistic creation.) S is totally uncritical of her Chinese sources, and cites them insufficiently and sloppily, following the mode of traditional Chinese scholars of relying on a fund of knowledge & wisdom that "we Chinese know." This is, of course, quite contrary to rules about the citation of sources in Western scholarly practice. There are some brief endnotes, but not nearly enough, nor are they full enough. Names are repeatedly misspelled, making it difficult for a reader to identify the references. (An example: pp. 18-19, references to several early Chinese writers on landscape and their essays, mostly misspelled and with no citations to the published texts or translations of them, although they are all included in the book that S cites in endnote 10.) There are sentences in the paper that, for me at least, are quite unintelligible. One makes allowances in this matter for foreign students, and feels especially sympathetic when the student's complexity of thought outruns her/his mastery of written English; but there is too much else that is wrong here. There are no discussions of any actual works of art (which I always insist on in course and seminar papers) and thus no real analytical

treatment of early Chinese landscape painting, only large, vague characterizations ("Soon in following Tang dynasty, landscape painting took off its childish look," p. 19.) The contrasting (p. 20 ff.) of the Chinese and European traditions isn't bad, but for the most part repeats the clichés about a metaphysical/spiritual China vs. a rational materialist Europe, exactly the timeworn formulation that anyone seriously considering the subject should quickly get beyond.

Another aspect of the same problem, from the instructor's point of view, is that the paper (I would judge, without knowing all the readings etc. that were involved in the course) doesn't show much evidence of S having benefited from the course; it's the kind of paper that a reasonably well-educated Chinese can do entirely from traditional Chinese sources, along with some readings in modern Chinese writers on the subject, as if non-Chinese scholarship didn't exist or wasn't of much value. Foreign writings are introduced, for the most part, only to be criticized. What an instructor hopes for is that the student will be able to combine, through the course, the Chinese strengths he/she already has with the foreign methodologies and approaches learned in the course; when this seems not to have happened, it's a disappointment, and could legitimately be reflected in a paper grade.

In the end, since the criteria for grading you sent state that a grade in the A range requires "sound critical evaluations" that aren't there in this case, and for other reasons suggested above, the best grade the paper could possibly merit would be in the B range. I might give the paper a B or B- on the basis of its strengths, along with stern warnings about its faults and how they should not be repeated in any future writings. (I might fault P a bit for not making these clear to the student ahead of time—or maybe he did. I myself hand out a five-page "Rules and Suggestions for Term Papers" in every course.) But I could understand if P's expectations had been clearly expressed in advance, and S's paper violated them, how he could even give a grade lower than B or B-, although I myself probably wouldn't. I might add, finally, that my experience with the British academic grading system as an outside reader for Hong Kong University several years ago made me conscious that your gradings are stricter than ours; a student here would be quite unhappy with a B or 13 grade in a seminar, but maybe the same isn't true there.

I hope this is helpful. Phone me if 'you want to discuss this further.

Sincerely,