

# Cultural Dimensions of Translation: The Case of Translating Classical Chinese Poetry into English

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## ABSTRACT

Among the numerous problems confronting the translation of classical Chinese poetry into English, the one that is probably the most difficult to tackle is the rendering of the subtle, complex relationship between *ching*, the description of physical reality, known as "scene," and *ch'ing*, the expression of human feeling, or simply "feeling." This paper focuses on the two most common modes of presentation of this central relationship in Chinese poetry and examines the root cause of the difficulties in translating them into English. It finds that the intractable difficulties in translating the scene-feeling relationship into English are, in fact, deeply imbedded not only in the fundamental differences between Chinese and English poetry and poetics, but more significantly, in the philosophical underpinnings that inform these two traditions of poetry. Thus, by way of such investigation, the limits of translation, which may first appear as a negative, can actually be turned into a positive illumination for comparative studies, shedding light on the essential similarities and differences between the two literatures and cultures compared.

## KEY WORDS

Chinese culture	<i>ching</i> (scene, physical reality)
<i>ch'ing</i> (feeling, emotion)	figures of speech (image, metaphor)
<i>hsing</i> (evocation)	<i>kan-ying</i> (affective response to external stimuli)
man-nature relationship	nature
Western culture	



The theory and practice of translation as the study of cultural interaction is the theme of a recent collection of essays by Susan Bassnett and the late André Lefevere under the title, *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*.<sup>1</sup> Regarded as the founders of modern interdisciplinary Translation Studies, the authors describe a paradigm shift not only in Translation Studies but also in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. In the last chapter, Bassnett refers to the cultural turn taking place in Translation Studies, a phenomenon that began in the late 70's, steadily developed in the 80's, and flourished remarkably in the 90's. Given the inseparability of the translation/culture complex, in this paper, I propose to explore the limitations of translation by examining a number of English renderings of classical Chinese poetry. After examining some of the intractable aspects of translating classical Chinese into English on the linguistic and literary levels, I conclude with some reflections on the philosophical underpinnings which have to be considered if true cultural understanding and comparison—at least partially—can be achieved.

Broadly speaking, every human speech act, oral or written, involves a series of translation processes, negotiating back and forth between mind and language; between the mind which first gave birth to the idea and the language which gives expression to that idea. And it is not simply a situation where the mind uni-directionally determines every detail for language simply to obey. It is rather a situation where language plays an active role, challenging the expressibility of the idea and, simultaneously, providing new, possibly better, alternatives for the mind to ponder. The more complicated and subtle the speech act, the more complex the negotiating process.

The complexity of the negotiating process is, of course, immeas-

urably augmented when dealing with poetry, arguably the most subtle and sophisticated of all human speech acts. This is all the more true when translating poetry from a source text whose language and culture are foreign to those of the target text. In this area of interlingual translation, rendering classical Chinese poetry into modern English is unquestionably the most challenging, if not an altogether impossible, task. For this is a case where the source text in Chinese and the target text in English are totally unrelated in their linguistic origins, literary conventions, and cultural orientations.

That there are limits in translating Chinese poetry into English is a sobering reminder that there are differences between Chinese poetry in its original form and Chinese poetry in English translation. A delineation of such limits, as Stephen Owen says, can be constructive, for it shows the area within which improvement is possible as well as where supplementary materials are necessary (83). Furthermore, a delineation of such limits can, in fact, be especially instructive in a comparative context. For what cannot be translated can enlighten us as to where the two literatures involved part company. The rationale behind this paper, therefore, is that determining the limits of translation helps to highlight the distinctive features of Chinese and English poetry as well as to enlighten us about fundamental differences between them and, more significantly, their respective cultures. What follows is divided into two parts: Part I deals with the limits of translation, and Part II explores the root cause of such limits in order to assist us in making some important distinctions about the cultures of these two poetic traditions.

## I. LIMITS OF TRANSLATION

Among the numerous challenges confronting the translator of Chinese poetry into English, the one that is probably the most difficult to tackle is the translation of the subtle and complex relationship between *ching* 景, the description of physical reality, and *ch'ing* 情, the expression of human feeling. This relationship known as *ch'ing-ching*, namely, feeling and scene, is at the very core of Chinese poetry. Briefly, *ch'ing* (feeling) relates to the thoughts, feelings, memories, and the

whole range of abstract and elusive human sentiments expressed in a poem; *ching* (scene), on the other hand, refers to the physical reality in all its sounds and sights that lends a living context to feeling.

Generally speaking, scene fulfills two functions in Chinese poetry: it provides an evocative and plausible context for the emotion of the poem and, simultaneously, it is the very expression of that emotion. Many renowned translators of Chinese poetry—Arthur Waley (14), David Hawkes (111-12), and Stephen Owen (86-87) among them—have called our attention to a distinguishing characteristic that has eluded most English renditions. Each in his own way has traced this characteristic to the special way in which Chinese poetry relates the description of physical nature to the emotional focus of the poem.

In fact, it is very often this bi-functional character of scene in relation to feeling that proves to be a thorny problem for its English rendition. The subtle and highly suggestive employment of scene, which often pervades the emotion of the poem and merges with it, is not something that can be easily assimilated in English translation. Why is this so? While the many differences between the Chinese and English languages are certainly a factor, our main concern in this paper is whether the different poetic conventions of the two traditions also play a crucial part. In other words, does English poetry resort to a significantly different mode of expressing emotion via concrete reality?

To explore these issues, we will first look at Chinese poetry in itself. Generally speaking, the intimately related scene-feeling expression is communicated through three different modes of presentation:

- A) scene and feeling are presented in separate lines of a poem;
- B) scene and feeling are presented in a single line of a poem; and
- C) scene and feeling are completely merged as a unified expression.

The last mode makes use of a kind of paronomastic technique by deliberately choosing certain words in order to create both syntactic and semantic ambiguity known in Chinese as “*wu-wo shuang-hsieh* 物我雙寫,” that is, dual presentation of both object and feeling in the disguise of a single presentation of the object. Each of these three modes of presentation presents a particular problem for English trans-

lation. I will restrict myself to the first two modes as they are the most commonly employed.

### A. The First Limiting Type: Scene and Feeling in Separate Lines

In this first mode, where scene relates to feeling in separate lines, I have selected two examples. The first one is a well-known couplet from a poem, entitled "When Lu Lun, My Cousin, Comes for the Night," by the late T'ang poet, Ssu-k'ung Shu (fl. 766-779), which I translate as follows:<sup>2</sup>

雨中黃葉樹

燈下白頭人

In the rain the yellow-leaved trees

Under the lamp a white-haired man

These lines are deliberately translated in a rather literal way, following the exact word order of the Chinese, in order to bring out the syntax of the original text. This is a poem about how, on a quiet autumnal night in a deserted village, the poet's cousin comes for a visit despite the fact that he is old, poor, and forgotten by the rest of the world. What we have here is an autumnal scene in the natural world and its equivalent situation in the human world. And the two worlds are engaged in a dynamic and mutually illuminating interplay, reinforced by the word-for-word parallelism in each of the two lines. The yellow leaves, under the continuous and relentless onslaught of the cold rain, not only add to the desolation of the atmosphere, but anticipate the arrival of winter in nature and man. And, at the same time, the sad but inescapable consciousness of old age as evidenced in the white hair, gives an emotional focus and significance to the autumnal scene outside.

This unspoken, yet powerfully poignant interchange between scene and feeling is largely lost in Witter Bynner's (106) translation:

And as raindrops brighten yellow leaves,

The lamp illumines my white head.

Leaving aside the odd temporal conjunctives (as “x,” then, “y”), we realize that Bynner translates the first line as merely a description of the scene and, hence, grammatically subordinate to the next line, deflecting our attention from the fact that the description of scene is also an expression of the poet’s emotion in the poem. One may partially attribute this kind of mistranslation to the nature of the English language itself, inasmuch as it seldom allows such fluid interplay which occurs so naturally in a syntactically looser language such as Chinese.

Compared to English, Chinese—especially in its classical form—can often be totally free from the cumbersome differences required by English case, gender, tense, and number. It is also true that Chinese syntactical units do not necessarily have to be yoked together with grammatical connectives such as prepositions and conjunctions, nor even by relative pronouns! Of course, this does not mean that the Chinese language expresses a world without distinctions in time, gender, voice, and number; nor does it mean that Chinese sentences simply flow into one another without any rhyme or reason.

But such omissions do lend a far greater degree of conciseness and fluidity in classical Chinese poetry than what is possible in a grammatically more rigid language such as English. For example, the relationship between the first line and the second line in the Chinese original (of the two lines cited above) is not clearly delineated at all. This can be an asset, for the reader is given much greater freedom to ruminate over their multiple relationships rather than being dictated by the tyranny of grammar. In the English version, on the other hand, the translator, following the conventions of the English language, is bound to specify the nature of the relationship between the two lines which are happily left open in the original. By doing so, Bynner has reduced, if not downright distorted, the fluidity and rich ambiguity between the two lines of the couplet in the Chinese poem.

While the differences between the Chinese and English languages are commonly acknowledged as a very important factor in translation, there is another feature which is every bit as important but seldom

explored, namely, the implicit principles underlying how poems are made or, simply, poetics. Taking the same couplet cited above, for example, while English grammar dictates that line 1 be related to line 2 regardless of the apparent absence of any connective in the original text, it does not dictate as to *how* they should be related. That the first line about the physical world should be read simply as background to the second line about the poet's white hair (Bynner's translation), is dictated in large measure by the way physical reality is *habitually* appropriated in English poetry. Hence, this mistranslation draws us into the realm of poetics.

We learn from our reading of English poetry, for example, that physical reality in most cases either (1) serves as a background to set off the emotional tenor of the poem and, henceforth, is both syntactically and semantically subordinate to the emotion of the poem; or (2) it is internalized through images or metaphors for the sentiment of the poem. The opening lines to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* certainly belong to the first category where the verdant spring scene is appropriated as background for the religious pilgrimage:

Whan that April with his showres soote  
 The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,  
 And bathed every veine in swich licour,  
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
 Whan Zephyrus eek with his swete breeth  
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
 Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,  
 And smale fowles maken melodye  
 That sleepen al the night with open yē,—  
 So priketh hem Nature in hir corages—  
 Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,  
 And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes  
 To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes;  
 And specially from every shires ende  
 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,

The holy blisful martyr for to seeke,  
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seke.

On the other hand, Shakespeare's well-known Sonnet 73 obviously belongs to the second category where the yellow leaves, bare ruined choirs, and glowing fire—all taken from external reality—are internalized as images of the aging poet whose creative power is also forsaking him:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bared ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.  
In me thou seest that twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west;  
Which by and by black night doth take away,  
Death's second self that seals up all in rest.  
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire,  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,  
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.  
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,  
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

Within this category of internalization, there are also poems where external reality may first appear as simple background and, then, becomes gradually internalized as a metaphor or symbol for the emotional tenor of the poem. This is often the case in English Romantic poetry. Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud" is a case in point. The whole poem plays out the process of how the daffodils, which first appeared "Beside the lake, beneath the trees," are gradually internalized as an image, a vision which "flash[es] upon that inward eye" of the poet. As typical of many Wordsworth's poems, the process of internalization in this poem follows the usual path from external sight to interior vision as the poet tells us how it all happens:

I gazed—and gazed—but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought:  
For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasures fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

Despite the general tendency among Romantic poets to bridge the gap between man and nature through coalescing the subjective mind and objective reality, scenic expressions have seldom succeeded in performing the dual function of serving as both setting and sentiment which is so common in Chinese lyrics. Although there are some exceptions, our query is why, in English poetry, description of external reality does not usually have within it the tendency both to evoke and to express the emotion of a poem as it so often does in Chinese poetry?

The question is asked not to make a value judgment about the relative excellence of Chinese and English poetry. Rather, it is asked to call our attention to some of the crucial and fundamental distinctions between these two great traditions of poetry in their respective employment of physical reality for the expression of emotion. For such exploration will directly lead us to realize that these intractable limits in translating Chinese poetry into English discussed above transcend the linguistic constraints of both poetic traditions. In short, the main issue is one of poetics whose roots are deeply imbedded in the different philosophical soil of each culture. This important issue will be addressed in Part II of this paper on the cultural implications relating to the limits of translation.

After this brief survey of how external reality habitually figures in English poetry, it becomes clearer why so many translators render classical Chinese poetry the way they do. We realize, for example, that Bynner's translation of Ssu-k'ung Shu's lines quoted above is not only dictated by English grammar, but it is also obviously conditioned by his

understanding of how scenic description normally functions in his own poetic tradition. In this case, Bynner opted for interpreting the line about the yellow leaves in Ssu-k'ung's poem as a pure setting to provide a temporal frame for what happens in the poem, rather than reading it as an internalized image for old age. This explains why the familiar "when . . . then" pattern in traditional English poetry is more or less followed in his translation. But in the Chinese original, there is a dynamic interplay between the yellow leaves and the white-haired man, where the autumnal scene in nature and that of man are merged into one. Bynner's reading is certainly a reduction, if not a misrepresentation, of the original poem.

Many English translations after Bynner have avoided relegating scenic description to the background like some stage prop. They often do so by approximating the fluid, open-ended syntax in the original Chinese text. But this is not satisfactory either. For example, take my own, not altogether successful, rendition of a well-known poem by Tu Fu, entitled "Climbing the Yüeh-yang Tower":

昔聞洞庭水  
今上岳陽樓  
吳楚東南坼  
乾坤日夜浮  
親朋無一字  
老病有孤舟  
戎馬關山北  
憑軒涕泗流

For long have I heard of Lake Tung-t'ing;  
Only now do I climb the Yüeh-yang Tower.  
The lake cleaves the lands of Wu and Ch'u to east and south;  
Sky and earth are afloat, day and night, upon the waters.  
Of friends and relatives I have received no word;  
Old and sick I am now in my solitary boat.  
Soldiers are still fighting north of the distant mountains;  
Tears gush down as I lean on the balustrade.

In this poem, the scene of the enormous Lake Tung-t'ing is

closely correlated with the loneliness of the despairing poet, all alone in a distant land, away from home while the protracted war seems to have no end. Line 3 depicts not only the vastness of the lake, but also anticipates line 5 describing the separation of the poet from his relatives because of the war inasmuch as the lake, too, stands between the lands of Wu and Ch'u. Line 4 describes the immense stretch of water where the sun rises and falls, poignantly setting off the solitariness and insignificance of the poet in line 6 where his lone boat is silhouetted against the horizon, helplessly swept here and there in the movement of both water and time. The correlation between scene and feeling, either through correspondence or through contrast, is spontaneously, yet intricately played out in the poem. The power and subtlety of this poem comes precisely from this unspoken correlation between scene and feeling where the scene provides, not only an evocative setting for the emotional content of the poem, but it is the very expression of that emotion.

This complex relationship is scarcely evident in my English translation unless one is educated to read Chinese poetry in the original or is given some kind of overlay of information that my commentary tries to supply. But to readers who do not know how to read Chinese poems—and it is precisely for these readers that English translations are made—the scenes in Tu Fu's poem, apart from describing what the poet sees from the Yüeh-yang Tower, do not seem to be very much related to the emotion of the poem. Hence, the over-all impression English readers might get from reading my translation of Tu Fu's poem above is that the lines are connected in a rather fragmented, disjointed manner without any particular rhyme or reason. This is because a whole dimension of the function of scene is unavoidably lost in the translation and, by losing that dimension, one actually loses much of the artistry and beauty of the poem as a whole. No wonder so many Western readers of translations find themselves frustrated and bewildered by their own lack of enthusiasm for the so-called wonders of the Chinese poetic tradition. Such a reduction or misreading often occurs in this first type of Chinese poetry where scene and feeling are juxtaposed in a lively interplay even though appearing in separate lines.

## B. The Second Limiting Type: Scene and Feeling in a Single Line

In the second type of Chinese poetry where scene and feeling are collocated in a single line, an opposite sort of problem occurs in the translation. That is, instead of translating the description of scene as a mere background for the poem, as we saw above, the scene that appears in this mode of presentation is often being pushed, as it were, too much to the foreground, as a metaphoric expression for the emotion. By doing so, its function of providing an evocative background engaging in a dynamic interchange with the expressed emotion as its external correlative is ignored. The closer proximity between scene and feeling occurring in a single line, often prompts the translator to misread the scenic description in this way. Take, for example, the third couplet (which I have put in bold type) of a familiar poem by Li Po, "Seeing an Old Friend Off." I will cite two full translations of this poem (both found in Yip)—the first by Ezra Pound (213) and the other by Wai-lim Yip (212).

青山橫北郭  
 白水繞東城  
 此地一為別  
 孤蓬萬里征  
 浮雲遊子意  
 落日故人情  
 揮手自茲去  
 蕭蕭斑馬鳴

Blue mountains to the north of the walls,  
 White river winding about them;  
 Here we must make separation  
 And go out through a thousand miles of dead grass.  
**Mind like a floating wide cloud,**  
**Sunset like the parting of old acquaintances**  
 Who bow over their clasped hands at a distance.  
 Our horses neigh to each other as we are departing. (Pound)

Green mountains lie across the north wall.  
 White water winds the east city.  
 Here once we part,  
 Lone tumbleweed, a million miles to travel.  
**Floating clouds, a wanderer's mood.**  
**Setting sun, an old friend's feeling.**  
 We wave hands, you go from here.  
 Neigh, neigh, goes the horse at parting. (Yip)

Yip's translation of the third couplet is, as he says, a deliberate departure from Pound's version so as to more closely approximate what takes place in the original where scene relates to feeling without any intrusive connectives. But, in fact, the presence or absence of the connectives does not seem to make much of a difference. For the connection that is explicitly stated in Pound's version with the simile, "like," is now implicitly suggested in Yip's version by a comma. In both cases, the "floating clouds" and the "setting sun," taken in themselves, are a kind of metaphor for the sentiment or emotion of the poem.

The point is that neither the "floating clouds" nor the "setting sun" are presented in any way as an integral part of the departure scene, evoking as well as engaging the sentiments between these two old friends in an intimate and spontaneous manner. The "floating clouds" which wander aimlessly, are seen by the poet as an apt correlative for his departing friend's share of uncertainty as he embarks on a distant journey. Whereas the "setting sun," casting its last lingering rays before it disappears from the horizon, could very well simultaneously elicit a similar sentiment in the heart of the poet as he, too, wishes his old friend could linger for a little time longer before departing.

Reducing the scenic expression to a rather mechanically coordinated image for feeling (either via Pound's "like" or Yip's comma), destroys the very vitality of the relationship between scene and feeling. For the organic relationship between scene and feeling and, hence, the ability of the scene to trigger something in the mind of the poet, is thus denied. And this organic unity between scene and feeling is precisely what lends Chinese poetry its spontaneity, its vividness and its life-like

quality.

The power of the scene-feeling relationship in Chinese poetry, whether realized in separate lines or in a single line, lies precisely in such a spontaneous encounter and dynamic interplay. This notion has been repeatedly emphasized by traditional Chinese poets and critics as the vital essence of great poetry. In the words of the Ming critic, Hsieh Chen (1494-1575), for example, "When 'feeling' and 'scene' touch one another, there is poetry" (3.1224). He further states that when these two elements "conjoin to become poetry, ten thousand forms can be summed up with only a few words. Running through them is an indivisible vital force without limits" (3.1180).

In a similar vein, the Ch'ing critic, Li Ch'ung-hua (fl. 1736), has this to say about the intimate relationship between scene and feeling: "One should know that there is 'feeling' in 'scene' and 'scene' in 'feeling,' and that when these two begin to give life to each other, the possibilities are infinite 要識景中有情，情中有景。二者循環相生，即變化不窮" (2. 931).

Summing up so far, what we have seen in these two types of English translations is, obviously, a reduction, if not a distortion, of the original text in Chinese. If to reduce scenic description to a mere metaphor (as found in this second type of the scene-feeling relationship), is to rob the scene of its life, then to render scene as simply a setting (as in the case of the first type where scene relates to feeling in two separate lines), is to take the "meaning" away from that life.

## II. CULTURAL DISTINCTIONS

It is certainly legitimate for us to ask why, in these English renditions, the scenic expression is translated either as a description of the setting or as an image for the emotion of the poem. Why is it that scenic description is not rendered as a unifying expression for both setting and sentiment as happens in the Chinese original? We may probe this question on several levels.

The syntax of the English language may first appear as the only and obvious factor. But even when the syntax is deliberately modified

in the English translation to approximate the open-endedness of the scene-feeling relationship (as in the Sun and Yip renditions above), it still does not work. It won't work because the English readers of these translations cannot use the same literary roadmap that they customarily follow when they read their own poetry. In the Western tradition, the physical reality on such a roadmap is, by and large, related to the emotional tenor of the poem, *either* as a mere background setting *or* foregrounded as a vehicle for that tenor through a deliberate process of internalization. And in the case of many Romantic poets, notably Wordsworth, this process of internalization may be unfolded in the poetic medium where the setting is gradually transformed into a metaphor, or such like figures of speech, or even a symbolic landscape of the poet's visionary experience.

Any casual perusal of English poetry anthologies will provide ample examples in this regard. The three examples quoted earlier are representative cases in point. The first one, the famous April scene from the "General Prologue" of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, howsoever lovingly described, is a mere setting. In the second example from Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, autumn in nature (described in the first quatrain), is clearly internalized from the very beginning of the poem as a metaphor of the poet's particular predicament of growing old along with his declining vitality and creativity. In the course of Wordsworth's poem about the daffodils, the flowers are gradually internalized as a very subjective vision of delight.

We may certainly probe even deeper beyond the linguistic and poetics differences and ask why, in English poetry, there seems to be such a reluctance for external reality to function simultaneously both as setting and sentiment for the poem? Specifically, if we believe that language is a system of signs and that each language, including poetic language—as so eloquently expressed by George Steiner—maps out a world differently, then the legitimate question to ask is what kind of world view the scene-feeling relationship in Chinese poetry maps out (Steiner xiv). How does the Chinese world view differ from the one mapped out in English poetry where external reality is usually expressed as a distinct entity apart from the human emotion? Such queries

inevitably lead us to explore the deeper cultural and philosophical dimensions beyond linguistic considerations and literary conventions.

### A. Chinese Concepts of External Reality

Let us now first consider the Chinese case. In the scene-feeling relationship in Chinese poetry, the operative thrust is *hsing* 興 (evocation). While the term is very complex and even enigmatic, the Sung critic, Li Chung-meng's (1020-1069) attempt at descriptive definition is probably the most cogent and pertinent: "To encounter objects such that feelings are aroused is *hsing*; feelings are thus set astir by the objects 觸物以起情謂之興，物動情也" (2.882).

In other words, *hsing* is a catalyst that not only brings together scene and feeling but, more importantly, it sets the latter astir to inspire the writing of poetry. Here, the notion of "objects"—like the term, "scene"—is a collective word for the myriad sounds and sights in external reality. The distinctive characteristics of *hsing*, so defined, are threefold: the emotion aroused is genuine, the process is spontaneous, and the physical reality that triggers the emotion is in the immediate environment of the poet. It is precisely these characteristics that typify what is generally considered good poetry in the Chinese tradition (Sun 143-44). The emotive spontaneity attributed to the notion of *hsing* is, thus, the operative and creative thrust of poetry. Without going into detail, suffice it to say that at the root of *hsing* is the primordial rapport between man and nature deeply imbedded in the Chinese psyche and culture. Inherent in the rapport is what I would call an "innate pull," drawing the poet towards his immediate environment evoked by an intuitively grasped affinity and, hence, analogy between them. Ultimately speaking, this scene-feeling relationship is predicated on a primordial intimacy and correspondence between man and nature. The erudite philosopher and critic, Wang Fu-chih (1619-1692), for example, cogently remarks in this regard:

情者陰陽之幾也，物者天地之產也。陰陽之幾動於心，天地之產應於外。故外有其物，內可有其情矣；內有其情，外必有其物矣。

Feelings are [stirred by the subtle] activity between *yin* and *yang*; and scenes (myriad things) are what grow between earth and sky. When this activity between *yin* and *yang* takes place in man's inner being, something from outside and between earth and sky will respond to it. Whatever thing there is outside, there can be a counterpart in man's inner being; whatever emotion there is in man's inner being, there must be the thing outside to match it. (1.20)<sup>3</sup>

The poet, according to Wang, being the most sensitive among men, is the most affected by and responsive to the constant changing dynamics between *yin* and *yang*. From the point of view of traditional Chinese cosmology, *yin* and *yang* are the two opposite, but mutually complementary, forces in the cosmos.

This kind of interchange between the cosmos and the poet and, for that matter, ordinary folk, is known as *kan-ying* 感應, an affective interaction between man and outer reality. Literally, *kan* means to feel and *ying* means to respond; the compound phrase, *kan-ying*, therefore, refers to one's response to the felt stimuli of the external world. Such a notion can only be formulated when there exists a deep conviction about the primordial rapport between man and nature. The notion of *kan-ying* is at the root of Chinese poetics. And from this root in Chinese tradition stems virtually all the important notions in Chinese poetics. *Hsing* is paramount among these ideas, but other related terms, to name but a few, are: Chung Hung's (fl. 483-513) expressions, *chi-mu* 即目 (what is immediate to the eye) and *chih-hsun* 直尋 (to seek what is in the immediate environment), as well as Wang Kuo-wei's (1877-1927) well-known notion of *pu-ko* 不隔 (not blocking a reader's appreciation by presenting scene and feeling in an immediately identifiable way) (Sun 165-66). All these notions point to the fact that a poet finds his best expression of feeling in his immediate vicinity. This is because his creative urge is usually inspired by what he sees and hears in his immediate surroundings as he engages in that dynamic interchange between himself and his environment.

Practically all traditional Chinese critics have emphasized the

*kan-ying* relationship between man and nature. Perhaps the earliest record of this interchange is found in the “Record of Music,” which is a section from the *Book of Rites*, composed during the Warring States period (403-221 B.C.): “The stirrings of the human heart are caused by objects. They are then given form in voice 人心之動，物使之然也。感於物而動，故形於聲” (Juan Yüan [compiler], 2.1527). Further on in the text, we find these words: “The ways in which objects in the universe can affect people are infinite 夫物之感人無窮” (Juan Yüan [compiler], 2.1529). But how the poet responds to the stimulus from outside is not yet explored in any detail until the Wei-Chin period (220-419), when the role of external reality in the creative process became an increasingly important concern for both poets and critics alike. Take, for example, the following lines from a few poets contained in Lu Ch’in-li’s anthology:

遠望令人悲  
春風感我心  
哀人易感傷  
觸物增悲心

To gaze from afar makes me sad,  
The spring breeze moves my heart. (Juan Chi [1: 498])  
The despondent person is easily moved to sadness,  
His woe increases when encountering external objects.

(Chang Tsai [1.741])

感物多所懷

Moved by objects, my heart is filled with nostalgia.

(Chang Hsieh [1.745])

The word, “objects” (*wu* 物), is frequently used during this period and its meaning is often interchangeable with “scene,” referring to a myriad of things in external reality.

The notion that physical reality could have this kind of impact on the emotional psyche of a poet is repeatedly discussed in criticism. In the very beginning of his *Wen Fu* 文賦 (*Essay on Literature*), Lu Chi (261-303), for example, details the emotive responses a poet has to the

changing scenery during the four seasons:

遵四時以歎逝，  
 瞻萬物而思紛；  
 悲落葉於勁秋，  
 喜柔條於芳春；  
 心慄慄以懷霜，  
 志眇眇而臨雲。

He laments for what's past by observing the ever-revolving seasons,  
 His thoughts grow profuse as he looks at the myriad things,  
 He grieves for the fallen leaves in the severity of autumn,  
 His heart delights in seeing the tender twigs of fragrant spring,  
 In thinking of the frost, his heart shudders.  
 While gazing at the clouds far and high above, his mind soars. (14)

Lu Chi was also an accomplished poet, so he is not simply theorizing here. What he says here may be a reflection of his own experience as a creative writer sensitive to all that goes on around him. Perhaps, for the first time in Chinese criticism, it would seem that this affective impact of nature on the creative process of a poet was fully recognized as an element of paramount importance.

Subsequent critics in ensuing eras have made similar and, in fact, much more elaborate remarks about the role of external reality and the corollary notion of “*kan-ying*.” Liu Hsieh (465-523), one of China's most important critics, devotes a whole chapter of his magnum opus, *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* 文心雕龍 (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) to “The Physical World.” At the very outset of this chapter, Liu describes how the various seasonal changes and the accompanying dynamics between *yin* and *yang* have a direct and pervasive impact on the human psyche and the creative process:

歲有其物。物有其容。情以物遷。辭以情發。一葉且或  
 迎意。蟲聲有足引心。況清風與明月共夜。白日與春林

共朝哉。

The year has its objects and every object has its appearance; human feeling changes according to the object, and literary expression is triggered by the feeling so evoked. A single leaf might be in perfect rapport with the mind. Similarly, the sound of the insects might touch the heart. How much more so would it be when the night is blessed with both clear wind and a bright moon or when the morning is adorned with both the bright sun and spring trees! (294)

Further on in the same chapter, Liu Hsieh vividly describes the interplay between mind and object in the sense of *kan-ying* and how it seeks expression in poetry:

是以詩人感物。聯類不窮。流連萬象之際。沉吟視聽之區，寫氣圖貌。既隨物以宛轉。屬采附聲。亦與心而徘徊

The poet's felt response to the object [scene] generates endless associations. He wanders about amidst the myriad phenomena in the universe; he savors and is in turn absorbed by what he hears and sees. On the one hand, he follows in minute detail and perfect harmony with the air and appearance of the object in his description; on the other hand, his mind also ponders back and forth when committing his observations to the sounds and diction of language. (294)

In a closing verse of the same chapter, Liu recapitulates the entire creative process, culminating in the final couplet that succinctly and memorably captures the give and take between poet and the physical world around him:

山杳水匝。樹雜雲合。日既往還。心亦吐納。  
.....情往似贈。興來如答。

Mountains rise one behind another,  
And waves meander and circle,

Trees tangle and clouds mingle.  
 As the eyes set themselves upon these sights,  
 The mind is stirred to express itself.

.....  
 When emotion extends itself as a gift  
 Inspiration returns as a response. (295)

Chung Hung (fl. 483-513), a contemporary of Liu Hsieh and also an important critic, goes even deeper and locates the prime mover in the *ch'i* 氣 or “the vital breath” of the cosmos rather than in the “object”: “The vital breath stirs objects and objects move people; hence, one’s feelings become agitated and are embodied in the form of dancing and singing 氣之動物，物之感人，故搖蕩性情，形諸舞詠” (2). *Ch'i* is among the most mysterious notions in traditional Chinese thinking. One of the earliest references to this notion is found in the *Tso Commentary* 左傳 which says that *t'ien* 天 (literally, heaven or sky, but also a collective term for nature), encompasses six different *ch'i*: *yin*, *yang*, wind, rain, cloudiness, and brightness.<sup>4</sup> Everything in the universe is constantly affected by the ever-changing *ch'i* because it permeates everything everywhere. It is the primordial force that rotates the four seasons and controls the life cycle of the myriad objects in the cosmos. Chung Hung’s notion of *ch'i* seems to correspond very closely to this primordial force.

To associate *ch'i* and “object” with the creative process is to regard poetry and the arts, in general, as the product of the affective and spontaneous interaction between man and the cosmos. What man resonates with and participates in is nature’s grand process of transformation, brought about by the continuous interaction between the two opposite, but mutually complementary, vital forces in the universe, *yin* and *yang*. It is precisely from this grand cosmic context that the relationship between “scene” and “feeling” acquires its full significance. Poetry originates from this subtle, but mutually illuminating, interplay and this notion is deeply imbedded in Chinese tradition.

In this cosmological view, man is not something separated from nature, but very much an integral part of it. By merging himself with the

cosmos, the poet is able to gather all that is around him and beyond in terms of both time and space, and subjugate all that he sees, hears, fancifully imagines, or remembers in the secret inner recesses of his mind, under the very nib of his pen. This creative process is succinctly captured in the following two couplets from Lu Chi's *Essay on Literature*:

觀古今於須臾  
撫四海於一瞬

Both past and present he surveys in one twinkling of the eye,  
And the four corners of the universe he views in a single  
glance. (25)

.....  
籠天地於有形  
控萬物於筆端

Then both heaven and earth are embodied in his writing,  
The myriad things are rendered pliable under the nib of his  
pen. (43)

It is in this power of rendering the cosmos pliable under the tip of the creative brush—both in terms of time and space—that we come to understand the true meaning of what Liu Hsieh means when he says that literature is the very heart of both heaven and earth [言之文也，天地之心哉] (Huang 1).

Hence, we come to appreciate the profound significance of *kan-ying*, that is, the affective interaction between man and outer reality and its catalyst *hsing*. In the macrocosmic world of poetry, the organic intimacy between man and nature is realized and expressed through *hsing*, the dynamic, spontaneous, and evocative vitality that inspires the poet. Charged by this catalytic force of *hsing*, physical setting enters into the mind of poet both evocatively and meaningfully as a perfect counterpart to his emotion. In Chinese poetry, external reality in the sense of “scene” is thus entrusted with a double function of evoking a responsive chord in the poet and, at the same time, naturally expressing for him his evoked thoughts and feelings.

## B. Western Concepts of External Reality

External reality in English poetry figures very differently when contrasted to the Chinese tradition. In most cases, as discussed earlier, it is introduced into a poem primarily via two different paths: either as a background to set off the emotional focus of a poem, or as a vehicle for the tenor of a poem. In the case of the latter, the path along which external reality enters a poem is basically of a metaphoric nature, where sensory properties in the physical world are clearly exploited as a means of poetic expression. Many of the poems in the English tradition fall into this category. Practically the entire spectrum of figurative language utilizes external reality in this way. Cases in point are: the rich complexity of Elizabethan sonnets (especially those of Shakespeare, characterized by the intricate relationship of multiple analogies), and the Metaphysical mode (where the relationship between the tenor and vehicle of a single analogy is rigorously elaborated upon in the form of a conceit).

In the case of the former way in which the West treats external reality as background, there are also many examples from the English tradition of writing poetry. They usually depict external reality primarily as a setting to provide a context for the tenor of the poem in such familiar formulas as, "when . . . then" or "as . . . then." We mentioned earlier that in this particular use of external reality, some variations were introduced where external reality first appears as a setting and then gradually takes on a supersensory dimension. In what is generally known as loco-meditative poetry, such as James Thomson's *The Seasons* and Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, we see a tendency whereby the landscape becomes a kind of *paysage moralisé* imbued with moral and religious significance. But it is in the subsequent Romantic period that natural scenery is given a much more prominent role than a mere setting, both in its own right as well as in its moral and religious significance for the beholding poet. In fact, it is often transformed into a symbolic visionary experience through a process of subjective internalization. In contrast to what often happens in the scene-feeling relationship in Chinese poetry, physical nature in English poetry seldom, if ever, enters into the poem as a unified

expression of both setting and sentiment. This is especially remarkable when we consider the conscious effort of the Romantic poets to coalesce the subjective mind and the external objective world.

Indeed, despite their individual differences, the two paths along which physical nature enters English poetry are almost all characterized by the fact that they come from *outside of* and are *subordinate to* human experience. This tendency in the West to treat nature as an external entity to be manipulated, is, as we shall now see, something deeply imbedded in the philosophical and theological tradition of Western culture. Generally speaking, the two main strands of Western culture—the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian traditions—have placed nature, and for that matter, all external reality, in a subordinate position to man.

### 1) *Classical and Biblical Origins*

In the classical tradition, Plato asserted that the everyday sensory world is but a dim and distant shadow of ideal forms. Thus, he not only rejected the pre-Socratic world where everything—gods, men, plants, and creatures—co-mingled and often shaded into one another through the magic of metamorphosis, but greatly influenced the Western mode of thinking by privileging pure reason as the supreme human faculty. The notion of Platonic forms, brain child of such metaphysical speculation, had an important impact on Western thinking about man and nature. In one form or other, these Platonic forms became men's ultimate ideal and intellectual *telos*, exempt as they were from change and mutability. More significantly, such "ideal" notions also opened an unbridgeable gap between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds and, by implication, between the human mind which conceives of the noumenal and the sensory world of physical nature itself. In this Platonic world view, the superiority of mind over matter, of the noumenal over the phenomenal, was clearly laid down.

Aristotle, on the other hand, with his close observation of biological facts as well as geometrical forms, brought Plato's forms back down to earth as the substantial, directing principle within all material things. In addition, Aristotle's genius for rigorous division and

classification, led him to his conviction about the tight, hierarchical relationships among individuals and things in the world. Aristotelianism thus provided a convenient ontological scale for what was later to be known as the Great Chain of Being, and this idea also became firmly ingrained in the Western mind for many centuries.<sup>5</sup>

We recall how delighted Michel Foucault was when he recounted (in the Preface to *The Order of Things*), that he learned from a passage in Borges how animals in a certain Chinese encyclopaedia were divided into various categories (e.g., belonging to the Emperor, embalmed, tame, suckling pigs, sirens, etc.). Such a seemingly unrelated and illogical classification would be totally inconceivable to the Western habit of thinking. Without getting into the fictitiousness of Borges's account or Foucault's own bias about the exotic Orient, suffice it to say that Foucault's fascination with the starkly different system of categories, only serves to prove how attractive this alternative could be, as opposed to the typically rigorous modes of Western classification and categorization.

It is, indeed, from this Great Chain of Being concept—with an Ultimate Good at the head as the supreme ideal form from the noumenal realm, and all other objects from the phenomenal world in an ever-descending order, that Western man knows his place. Because he is endowed with a rational mind capable of conceiving ideal forms, he is superior to all creatures below him. In the famous lines from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*:

Vast Chain of Being! Which from God began  
 Natures ethereal, human, angel, man,  
 Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,  
 No glass can reach! From Infinite to thee,  
 From thee to nothing.

Thus, Greek teaching, with its emphasis on the eternal ideal and supreme good as the ultimate *telos* over the sensory and mutable world, certainly provided a convenient, philosophical thought-system for the development of later Christian theology, as Augustine's and Aquinas's

debts to Plato and Aristotle respectively amply illustrate. Without going into detail about the long and complicated process of assimilation, suffice it to say that the Christian world view is also characterized by the polarization between the noumenal and phenomenal, only that the noumenal now means the realm of the divine described in biblical revelation. Instead of the Greek Supreme Ideal or the Uncaused Cause presiding over the Great Chain of Being, sits the Christian God as Creator and Sustainer of all things. To the extent that man is made after the image of God, he too is assigned a position which is both *apart from* and *superior to* all other creatures in the world. In the King James version of the book of Genesis (1: 26, 28), we hear precisely such a proclamation from God (italics mine):

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . . And God blessed them and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and *subdue* it: and have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

Not only is man's supremacy over the physical world insisted upon, he is also given full license and endorsement from the Deity to make use of the physical world and to manipulate it to his advantage. Despite all the subsequent controversies between religion and science, ironically, the latter owes much to the former, inasmuch as the Western world's great scientific and technological achievements were largely inspired and sanctioned by this biblical mandate to have *dominion* over physical nature. Let us now skip to that post neo-classical period in English literature which is often characterized as the richest manifestation of nature poetry in the entire tradition.

## 2) *Pre-Romantic and Romantic Developments in England*

As Genesis revealed, while man is given supremacy over nature, yet, to the extent that nature is created by God, it, too, carries the imprint of the divine and is thus a vehicle for the divine. This latter notion

of divinized nature took on a special emphasis with the Pre-Romantics around the mid-eighteenth century in England. In addition, the advent of modern science's experimental method which looked on nature as a life-enriching and a fascinating world to explore during this period, helped to offset primitive mankind's early associations of natural phenomena with evil spirits or occult explanations about nature's mysterious and terrifying ways. Although some thinkers became Deists, and nature was increasingly regarded by them as the Great Machine working according to rigidly defined laws of material causation, they still acknowledged God as the First Cause. And it must not be forgotten that most of the great scientists of the time—Newton, for instance—were also noted theists. We can recall Pope's memorable couplet:

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:  
God said, Let Newton be! and all was light!

It is against this background that nature began to figure more prominently in the loco-meditative poetry of the period where it became a *paysage moralisé*. This became even more of an issue in the subsequent 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic era where the relationship between man and nature was a central concern. Yet, curiously, despite this elevated notion of nature and despite man's increasing affinity with nature as expressed in these poems, it is still distinctly *apart from* man and *subordinate to* his own all powerful and subjective perception.

Take, for example, the English Romantic poets who yearned to return to nature. Their notion of unity with nature is very different from the Chinese notion of such unity. When Coleridge talks about his theory of Imagination which is for him the most important faculty of a poet, he is primarily referring to it as an act of coalescing of subject and object. Subject here is the Self or the intelligence, the sentient knowing mind; Object is Nature, what is known by the mind in the act of knowing (Coburn 51). For Coleridge, object is not something that is given to the mind but something that is perceived through the subjective consciousness. In other words, unlike the Chinese notion of scene, in this nineteenth-century form of literary idealism, object depends on the

subject's active perception to bring it into being. Thus, external nature is primarily the product of the constructing, forming activity of the subjective mind. In his "Dejection Ode," for example, Coleridge openly declares that:

We receive but what we give,  
 . and in our life alone does Nature live:  
 Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!

Nature, in other words, finds its fulfillment and existence primarily in the human mind. It is through the human mind that nature lives, and it is through the mind that nature acquires its fullest meaning.

Similarly, in Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," we hear his strong egotistical voice asserting man's "philosophic mind" over nature:

We will grieve not, rather find  
 Strength in what remains behind;  
 In the primal sympathy  
 Which having been must ever be;  
 In the soothing thoughts that spring  
 Out of human suffering;  
 In the faith that looks through death,  
 In years that bring the *philosophic mind*. (Italics mine)

What we see here is the dominance of the human mind over nature. On the other hand, among the other Romantics, it is primarily Keats who repeatedly questions this egotistical imposition and this emphasis on the human intellect or reason. He suggests, in fact, that such an imposition and emphasis might be just what hinders our ability to enter into the object of contemplation. In the following excerpts from his letters (all taken from the Rollins's edition), we discover how he questions the power of the intellect and in what way anybody—in particular, the poet—truly knows reality. He is frustrated by his inability to bridge the gap between his subjective self and objective reality. It

is also interesting to note that all his musings center around what he defines as a “negative capability,” a true sign of poetic genius, through which one negates one’s self in order to become one with the object:

I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning—and yet it must be—Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever [when] arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections. . . . or if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel. (I, 185-86; Nov. 22, 1817)

He goes on to discuss

what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason. (I, 191; Dec. 21, 27[?], 1817)

In fact, Keats insists that we must

not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at: but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive—budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every noble insect that favors us with a visit—sap will be given us for Meat and dew for drink. (I, 232; Feb. 19, 1818)

Finally, he states paradoxically that:

A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and fill-

ing some other Body—the Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God’s creatures. (I, 387; Oct. 27, 1818)

On the surface, it may seem that Keats’s confidence in the Apollonian rapturous unity with the objective world through a negation of the subjective ego, is very far removed from Coleridge’s assertion of the subjective perception in one’s interaction with the objective world. But, fundamentally speaking, they are obsessed with the self-same concern: how does man come to know external reality and relate to it? For Keats, it is through the surrender of one’s own egotistical self so as to be more receptive to what is outside of him; for Coleridge, it is through the faculty of imagination which actively creates in the mind the image of the external world. Furthermore, their very obsession with this concern is a reflection of their similar awareness of the wide separation that exists between mind and matter, self and object. Many of Keats’s poems are preoccupied with such painful awareness. In the famed “Ode to a Nightingale,” for example, there is a celebration of wishful thinking on the part of the *persona* of the poem to become a nightingale to “fade away into the forest dim.” Yet, at the end of the poem, he is painfully aware that such a union with the nightingale is impossible:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf.

Hence, for both Keats and Coleridge, there is always an unbridgeable gap between mind and matter as well as self and object and, therefore, between man and nature, despite their different approaches to the relationship between subjective mind and objective reality. As we have briefly discussed, the notion that man is somehow a separate kind of

creature far *apart from* everything else in the world, is a deep-seated one whose origin goes all the way back to both the Classical and Christian traditions. This is not something that can be reasoned easily or fancied away.

The English Romantic poets' obsessive concern with the relationship between man and nature was, naturally, spurred on by their fond wish somehow to return to nature. But for those among them who were more philosophically inclined, such as Coleridge, this particular concern about precisely how man comes to know external reality, was directly related to the philosophical concerns of the time. This kind of thinking was the focus of investigation among the empiricists (e.g., Berkeley and Hume) of the late 17th to the 18th centuries. They believed that our knowledge of external reality not only is achieved through sense impressions, but also through individual experiences and a process of subjective associations. John Locke, the most eminent thinker among them, sets out in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (See Nidditch edition, Bk. I, Ch. II, *passim*) to repudiate the Platonic notion that there are innate ideas and puts forward a bold and revolutionary argument that our knowledge comes from the ultimate word, experience (Bk. II, Ch. I, 104).

On the other hand, in this monumental essay, Locke also realizes that certainty of knowledge is ultimately unattainable through this arena of sensory experience (Bk. IV, Chs. XV-XVI, *passim*), and that we should content ourselves with probable knowledge we can obtain. He further emphasizes that the *highest degree of probability* is that which has been sanctioned by the greatest consent of all Men, in all ages (Bk. IV, Ch. XVI, 661). To quote Pope's *Essay on Man* again,

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of mankind is man,

also reflects this down-to-earth type of thinking, namely, that we should be satisfied with what we can readily perceive.

Later on, this emphasis on subjective experience and association remained popular during the early Romantic era; it was, however, in-

creasingly superseded by the German transcendental idealists who believed that ultimate reality can be apprehended through what Kant calls *Vernunft* (reason), a central subject in his philosophical system. According to Kant, reason is a superior kind of human faculty capable of grasping absolute truths and universals beyond sensory data through creative synthesizing rather than pure analytical thinking. As Kathleen Coburn notes, Coleridge's transition from his well-known emphasis on the mechanical Fancy (a faculty dependent on sense perception and association), to his privileging of creative Imagination reflects a passage from Hartley, an early eighteenth-century empirical thinker and, ultimately, to Kant (59). We note that Coleridge's explanation of "Imagination," is very much in line with what Kant, his metaphysical mentor, means by *Vernunft*.

### 3) *Persistence of Platonic Thinking*

Indeed, when we look at these Pre-Romantic and Romantic philosophical concerns about reality and man's knowledge of the same as well as his relationship with it, we cannot but come to the realization that all these concerns, despite their different orientations, largely originate from the Platonic view of reality which is split between the noumenal and the phenomenal with a negative bias toward the latter as but a shadow of the former. In fact, this dualistic view of reality has, for centuries, dominated the entire Western tradition. No wonder Alfred Whitehead once remarked that European philosophy was just a series of footnotes to Plato.

Even as Locke, for instance, affirms that the outer world we sense is what we humans should deal with, he cannot reason away the abstract, philosophical ghost of some kind of ultimate reality lurking behind his affirmation. He has to admit that definitive and complete knowledge of the illusive and ultimate reality is unattainable through the senses. Ironically and in the same vein, even as the English Romantics avow to coalesce man and nature, the subjective ego with its brooding consciousness and intellect raises its head vis-à-vis the very reality it tries to coalesce and thus reaffirms instead—howsoever unwittingly—man's intellectual superiority and dominance over external

reality rather than his self-effacing unity with it.

Similarly, despite the conviction of German transcendental thinkers about art as a final overcoming of the deep dualism between the sensory and suprasensory, the phenomenal and the noumenal—because it enables us to have access to what Kant calls the “intellectual archetype” through “intellectual intuition”—still there is within this conviction an assertion of man’s superiority because of his intellectual faculty. And again, ironically, it is this intellectual faculty which will set man *apart from* and yet *dominate* anything that he contemplates, the very opposite of what reason is supposed to accomplish.

In Kant’s treatment of the sublime in his *Critique of Judgment*, for instance, we find that much of the Western attitude toward the man/nature relationship is reinforced within his categories of “separation” and “domination.” According to Kant, while recognizing man’s impotence as he experiences nature’s overwhelming magnitude—“the threatening rocks, clouds piled up in sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanoes in all their violence of destruction” (precisely those scenes which excite the Romantic imagination)—the philosopher proceeds to reaffirm man’s superiority over nature by virtue of his being a rational, moral being (italics in Kant quotations are mine):

Now in the immensity of nature . . . we find our own limitation, although at the same time in our rational faculty we find a different nonsensuous standard, which has that infinity itself under it as a unity, *in comparison with which everything in nature is small, and thus in our mind we find a superiority to nature even in its immensity. . . . Therefore nature is here called sublime merely because it elevates the imagination to a presentation of these cases in which the mind can make felt the proper sublimity of its destination, in comparison with nature itself.* (Adams 396)

Kant further states that “sublimity . . . does not reside in anything of nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious that

we are *superior to nature within, and therefore also to nature without us*" (Adams 396).

This Platonic/Kantian anthropocentric thrust, asserting man's superiority over nature, remains vigorous throughout traditional mainstream Western philosophy. Despite occasional dissenting voices from within the tradition, both Plato and Kant as well as practically all major Western thinkers insist that it is man's rational faculty which conceives a noumenal world over and beyond the phenomenal world and, thus, creates the inevitably dualistic view of reality.

On the other hand, to paraphrase Nietzsche, one of the most vehement critics of this Western attitude toward nature: For the ancient Greeks, there is an Apollonian perspective that is deliberately interposed between man and nature in order to veil and, thereby, render the natural world livable and bearable to man. According to Nietzsche, an artifice is thus considered to be a fabrication over and above nature. Furthermore, this unfortunate notion was further developed by Christianity: man is made to triumph over nature and by thus competing with nature, man further separates himself from nature (Kaufmann 33-48, *passim*). Nietzsche's typically impassioned critique powerfully and succinctly summarizes the all too common Western view of man's *separation from* and *manipulative dominance* over external reality as something deeply ingrained in this tradition and psyche since the time of ancient Greece.

Given such an assertion of man's distance from and superiority over nature in Western culture, it is inevitable that this attitude is often reflected in its poetry when writers appropriate external reality in relation to the human world. As illustrated above, in English poetry, external reality is often either *outside of* the human world as a background or is *internalized* as an image or metaphor for the human world through deliberate manipulation by the poet. In fact, the representative poems I have chosen from the English tradition, are both an analogue to and a natural corollary of man's relationship with nature in traditional Western philosophical thinking. By contrast, we have also seen how a very different cosmology, characterized by a primordial unity between man and nature in the Chinese tradition, is reflected in the scene-feeling

relationship in its poetry. Finally, we can now turn our attention to two key terms which must be carefully distinguished and which summarize much of the foregoing philosophical reflection in literary terms.

#### 4) *English Metaphor and Chinese Hsing*

In our study of the scene-feeling relationship, we have demonstrated that the creative and operative thrust of this central relationship in Chinese poetry is *hsing*, which is predicated on an organic, dynamic rapport between poet and his immediate environment. Ultimately, *hsing* is a poetic expression of man's resonance with the cosmos as an integral part of it. What, then, is the creative and operative thrust in English poetry given its very different kind of thinking as part of the whole Western tradition? My answer to this query is: metaphor. By metaphor, I do not mean here simply a figurative device in poetry. On the contrary, it represents a creative and operative mode central to Western poetry in its search to body forth an otherwise ineffable world of feelings in the heart of the poet. More significantly, it also represents a mode of thinking which usually hearkens back to a superior world of transcendence from that of mere physical reality. This deeply imbedded view in Western philosophy and theology, considers the world more as something divided between the noumenal and the phenomenal, than as an already unified whole (despite incarnationalist beliefs to the contrary). In recent decades, I am happy to add, the Western notion of metaphor has changed its emphasis from tenor to vehicle, reflecting a corollary shift of emphasis from the noumenal to the phenomenal. This is in keeping with phenomenological studies in Western philosophy which tend to concentrate on the concrete and immediate phenomena of reality.

Viewed in this way, metaphor or metaphorical thinking is both a reflection and a product of a Western view of reality just as *hsing* is in the Chinese tradition. Hence, to equate the scene-feeling relationship with mere metaphor, image, or such like figures of speech in Western poetics is fundamentally wrong. To be sure, to the extent that sensory details are presented to embody the otherwise elusive sentiments of a poem and, henceforth, to give the latter what Shakespeare would call a

“local habitation,” there *is* a common ground between the “scene-feeling” relationship in Chinese poetry and certain figures of speech in Western poetry. For all poetry, Chinese and Western alike, seeks vivid and palpable means to express what is felt within. But over and beyond this purely technical level, these two poetic devices are radically different in their creative thrust and the underlying epistemology that informs them. Thus, equating one with the other, as so many translators and scholars of Chinese poetry do, is to overlook the most fundamental and—what I would consider—a defining distinction between the two poetic traditions and their respective philosophical backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, such a facile identification is what ultimately accounts for some of the persistent misreading of the Chinese scene-feeling relationship in English over and beyond the factor of the limiting differences in other linguistic and poetical aspects.

In conclusion, when we look at the limits of translation, we must not only investigate the complex issues of language and literary technique in both the source and target texts. More fundamentally, we must go deeper and examine the philosophical underpinning of such literary techniques. It is by engaging ourselves on this cultural level beyond significant, but limited, language and literary considerations, that we are able to locate and reveal these deeply embedded root causes of the limits of translation. And it is through this kind of investigation that the phrase, limits of translation, which may first appear as a negative, can actually be turned into a positive illumination for comparative studies, shedding light on the fundamental similarities and differences between the two literatures and cultures compared.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation* (Cleveland, England: Multilingual Matters, 1998). The first chapter of this book (12-24), “Chinese and Western Thinking on Translation,” by Lefevere, is of particular interest for scholars working in East-West studies. The final chapter (123-40), “The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies,” by Bassnett, describes the evolution of Translation Studies in

recent decades.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are my own.

<sup>3</sup> My translation is based on Wong Siu-kit's rendition, from his "Ch'ing and Ching in the Critical Writings of Wang Fu-chih," in *Chinese Approaches to Literature From Confucius to Liang Ch'i-ch'ao*, ed. Adele Rickett (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) 140.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of *ch'i*, see Li Tu, *Chung hsi che-hsüeh ssu-hsiang chung te t'ien-tao yü shang-ti* [The Notion of the Way of Heaven and the Supreme Deity in Chinese and Western Philosophical Thought] (Taipei: Lien-ching, 1987) 45-49. For a study of *ch'i* in relation to artistic creation, see Ch'ien Chung-lien, "Shih ch'i," in *Ku-tai wen-hsüeh li-lun yen-chiu*, ed. Ku-tai wen-hsüeh li-lun yen-chiu pien-wei-hui (Shanghai: Shanghai Ku-chi, 1981) 5: 129-150.

<sup>5</sup> See Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1974), particularly the Second Chapter, "The Genesis of the Idea in Greek Philosophy."

<sup>6</sup> I am well aware of the dispute among scholars of Chinese literature about the nature of Chinese metaphor, but my extended views on the subject must be set aside for another paper.

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