

## Issues in Reception Theory and Chinese-Western Comparative Literature\*

*Kwok-Kan Tam*

With an emphasis on illustrating the literary fortune of an author, studies in literary reception and influence were at one time considered the "wine and bread" of comparative literature. This approach in European comparative literature has declined since the 1950s with the change of critical focus from an interest in historicist-positivist considerations to that in aesthetics resulting from the emergence of New Criticism, which signified a change in critical paradigm. Before New Criticism, the critic's job was to find out the author's meaning in a work. Therefore when a critic asked the question: "What does a work mean?", his interest was in what the author meant in the work. But the New Critics were not interested in what the author meant in a work. What New Criticism gave to the critic and literary historian is respect for the autonomy of a literary work, whose meaning as well as aesthetic qualities was considered to be independent of the author's intention. Hence, the biographical and historical approach was considered non-aesthetic. The rise of New Criticism thus indicated the shift of critical interest from that in the relationship between the author's intended meaning and the work itself to that in the intrinsic qualities of the work. In this sense, New Criticism prepared the way for the later rise of the Structuralist approach in literary study.

René Wellek and Austin Warren distinguish three things in literary

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study in their book *Theory of Literature: literary theory, literary criticism and literary history* (Wellek and Warren, 39). The nineteenth-century interest was in literary history, on which traditional studies in comparative literature represented by the French School were based. The twentieth-century interest in literary study shows a gradual move from literary history to literary criticism with an emphasis on intrinsic studies, which has indirectly brought about a reconsideration of the comparative methodology.

The contribution of New Criticism to comparative literature was the wider application of methods in analogy study with an emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of the works compared. This interest in the internal qualities of the work is one of the origins of Structuralist poetics. Yet the Structuralist approach has been challenged by many anti-Structuralist critics with the question whether a work really has an inherent structure or the structure is imposed upon the work by the Structuralist critic. This further brings about another question: Is the meaning of a work in the work itself, or is it in the reader's interpretation? In his later career as a Structuralist, Roman Jakobson also asked a similar question when he constructed his model of communication placing the addresser and the addressee on opposite ends. When such questions are asked, the critic has to go beyond Structuralism to Semiotics in order to obtain a satisfactory answer. A Structuralist critic does not interpret, what he does is to analyze a work, break it down into parts and put the parts together in an intelligent way so as to discover patterns. A Semiotics critic interprets by asking questions about the structure of signification, that is, how meaning is embedded in a structure. But once the critic ventures into the realm of meaning, a series of issues in phenomenology, hermeneutics and reception theory will come into play in his endeavour to disentangle the intricate relationships between the author's intended meaning, the text's structure, and the reader's role in interpretation.

For a comparatist, he has to ask what implication does *rezeptionsästhetik* have and how a reader's interpretation of a text will affect its reception and influence, the two traditional main areas of comparatistic inquiry. It is for this reason that the role the reading public plays in the reception of a literary work comes up as a question to the literary historian and the comparatist again half a century after the age of New Criticism. This is the historical background for the recent rise of reception theory and the growing interest in the history of literary reception.

The rise of reception study in Europe in recent years with a new

perspective on the relationships between the author, text, and the reading public, however, is also due to the growth of interest in communication theory as a general methodology in humanistic studies. *Rezeptionsästhetik*, an approach referring to the historical study of literary reception, brings forth a new orientation in literary study. Instead of a set of hard-and-fast rules in methodology, it provides the critic, as well as the literary historian, an open-ended direction of inquiry into the relationships between the author, text, and the reading public in the light of literary communication (Jauss, 15). This approach has developed into a more coherent theory since the mid-1960s. A glance at recent publications on literary theory will evidence the dramatic rise of *rezeptionsästhetik* as an approach in the study of literary reception. In Europe, the University of Konstanz has sponsored several conferences on reception studies. Special issues on the topic have appeared in such leading journals as *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik* (1974), *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft* (1974), *Poetica* (1975 and 1976), *Deutscherunterricht* (1977), *Oeuvres et Critiques* (1977-78), and *Poétique* (1979). The major Norwegian literary journal, *Edda*, published a special issue on the history of Ibsen reception and the aesthetics of reception in August 1986. In the English-speaking world, internationally prestigious journals, such as *Diacritics* and *New Literary History*, have devoted studies to reception theory and its application in the study of literary history. The *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* has published a survey on *rezeptionsästhetik* and its implication for comparative literature (1975). In Douwe W. Fokkema and Elrud Kunne-Ibsch's book, *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century*, there is a chapter on "The Reception of Literature and *Rezeptionsästhetik*" (1977). The Konstanz School's contributions to the study of literary reception are collected in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism* (1979). With the voluminous publications related to the intricate relationship between the reader and the text, Iser Wolfgang has become a familiar name to English-speaking readers. Hans Robert Jauss's essays are also available in English translation in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982) and *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (1982). Robert C. Holub's *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (1984) provides an up-to-date survey of the subject.

The international recognition of the importance of *rezeptionsästhetik* and its implication for comparative literature can be demonstrated by the subject of "Literary Communication and Reception" at the Ninth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association in 1978. The wide

range of implications of *rezeptionsästhetik* has given an opportunity to the revival of the long neglected discipline of literary history and reception. More and more scholars have become aware of the usefulness of *rezeptionsästhetik* as a methodological concept in comparative literature. Following Harold Bloom's argument, Jonathan Culler redefined literary influence in terms of intertextuality and called for a reconsideration of reception-influence study from the viewpoint of *rezeptionsästhetik* in his article, "Comparative Literature and Literary Theory," published in *Michigan Germanic Studies* (1978). In addition, Douwe W. Fokkema has dealt with the history of modern Chinese literature from the perspective of literary reception in both his chapter on "Marxist Theories of Literature" in *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century* (1977) and his article, "New Strategies in the Comparative Study of Literature and Their Application to Contemporary Chinese Literature," published in *New Asia Academic Bulletin* (1978).

Why do comparatists return to the discipline whose value they once suspected? Of what nature is the traditional study of literary reception and influence? Labeled as "rapports extérieurs" and considered as being devoid of aesthetic consideration, many early studies in literary reception and influence are a product of the nineteenth-century belief in factualism and positivism and the belief that to explain things in their external causal relationships is one of the primary concerns of literary study. The traditional interest of literary reception is not in the readers' interpretation of a work, but rather on the author's impact and fortune in another culture. Despite severe criticism, influence studies in the traditional way have the merit of being solid, thus avoiding the pitfall of being speculative and impressionistic. The major weakness is that they put too much emphasis on authors and easily turn into biographical studies. The twentieth-century emphasis on the internal qualities of a literary work is both a reaction to the mere interest in external relationships and an awareness of the nature of literature as an art form. Comparatists, such as René Wellek, Claudio Guillén, and Haskell M. Block, have warned against the overemphasis on external relationships at the expense of internal aesthetics in the study of literary influence. Resulting from this attitude is a suspicion of the aesthetic value of establishing literary influence with an emphasis on external relationships. The history of comparative literature, even within the confines of Euro-American literature has shown that the study of literary influence in the traditional way has many limitations, despite the change of emphasis from "rapports

exterieurs" to "rapports interieurs."

In the realm of literary study, there are numerous approaches putting different emphasis on the three elements: author, text, and reader. Positivist critics believe in the existence of a single valid interpretation and regard criticism as a process of *explication de texte*, which emphasizes that the reader's interpretive context and code must match the author's. To explicate is to dig out what is hidden in the author's process of textual production by dissecting the author's mind as well as the text. Consistency with the author's context and code is considered by positivist critics as a criterion for judging whether or not an interpretation is valid. This approach, in which only one interpretation is valid for one text, can be termed as author oriented. It emphasizes communication between the author and the reader. Correct reading is to obtain the author's message and the critic's job is to uncover those messages hidden in the text.

The aesthetic-formalist approach, which is text oriented, places great emphasis on the autonomy of the text and treats literary influence mainly as a matter of textual production, thus going into the blind alley of psychological investigation beyond literary study, as does the positivist approach, which neglects the relative autonomy of the text and goes into a study of the author's life. It ignores the function of the author in the communication process and the reader's interaction with the text and neglects the validity of interpretations resulting from extraliterary considerations. Roland Barthes has demonstrated in his study of Balzac's story *Sarrasine* that ninety-three different, yet all valid, interpretations can be generated with changes in the five interpretive codes: action, puzzle, culture, connotation, and symbol. In other words, the reader's choice of interpretive code significantly affects his interpretation of the text.

Apparently research in the reading process and in the reader's response to a literary text has distinctly altered the course of contemporary literary study, for, as Wolfgang Iser points out, meaning exists only in reading. Although this is not an invention or discovery of *rezeptionsästhetik* it is its major exponents, Jauss and Iser, who have made critics more conscious of the fact that the reader also plays an important role in interpretation. The implication of *rezeptionsästhetik* to reception-influence study in comparative literature is that it places the focus on the reader's role in reception. It thus brings the discipline to a new horizon of comparing the different value systems, cultural and literary, in which the works of an author are received. In the study of literary reception, there are two

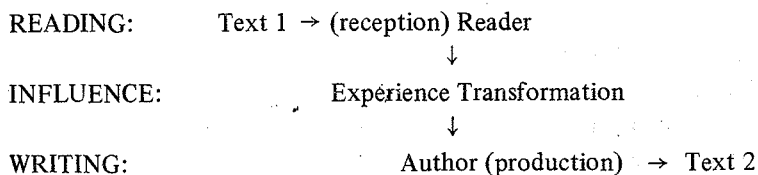
approaches: one can be called "macro-study," and the other "micro-study." To the first approach belongs the study of the reader's response to a text in terms of psychology of reading and transformation of experience; to the second belongs the study of literary history and the phenomenon of intercultural reception as a communication process. It is the macro approach of reception studies that has a significant implication for comparative literature as well as for cross-cultural studies.

Claudio Guillén thinks that influence study at its best shows how the impact on a writer, which belongs to the level of individual experience in life, can be transferred to the genesis of a work, which is at the level of creative experience. In other words, influence is defined as a process of displacement of experience from a writer's reception of a work, or a number of works, to the production of his own work. It deals with the process of how experience in reading is transformed to that in writing. Defined as such, influence is a psychological process, which can hardly be verified, rather than an aesthetic investigation. Thus he says, "Negatively speaking, the poem is the result of a displaced process of experience. Positively speaking, it reveals the attempt to inform, shape, and conquer one's environment through a creative passage from one order of existence to another" (Guillén, 57). Reduced to an investigation of creative psychology, influence study inevitably goes into a blind alley. Thus Claudio Guillén says, "Obviously the discovery of an influence does not modify our appreciation or evaluation of a poem (although conventions may), and the analysis of these phenomena has precious little to do with any absolute scale of aesthetic values or broad survey of literary achievements" (Guillén, 63).

Registering a reaction of modernist aestheticism to nineteenth-century historicism, Guillén's attitude reflects what Jauss calls the change of critical paradigm. The accusation that reception-influence study is devoid of aesthetic value does not mean that it has no literary value. Actually, aesthetic judgment varies with the reader's experience and the norms of the interpretive community. Literary history, to the dismay of the scholars who scorn it, has ironically informed them that there was a classical period in which works that successfully imitated the approved great models were considered to be good writings.

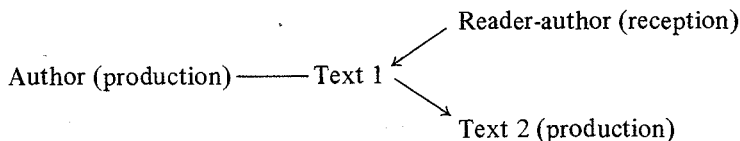
Past arguments concerning reception-influence studies focused mainly on how experience in reading could be transformed into that of creativity. In other words, interest was in how reception could be turned into production. The concept of literary reception in Claudio Guillén and other

comparatists is limited to and equated with the reading process, which belongs to a different order of experience from that of literary production:



For Guillén, literary influence refers to a complete process from reception to production, which is similar to Wolfgang Iser's concept of reading, in which the reader is at the same time the author, as in each reading he reconstructs the experience given in the text's linguistic structure, thus producing his own text, which is a process of literary creation. It is hard to distinguish Guillén's literary creation from Iser's reading as production. While Guillén and other comparatists see reception as a part of the whole process of influence, Jauss and the reception theorists consider influence, the other way round, as part of reception. Literary influence is also reception, for it is a reflection of the reader's response to a text. From a diachronic point of view, historical literary influence, as Jauss realizes, "presupposes a response whenever an 'effect' of something past is recognizable in the present" (Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 64).

The shift in viewpoint signifies an important change in approach to reception-influence study. The traditional comparatist is interested in the process from reception to production, whereas a reception studies scholar is concerned with that from production to reception, which is what is called literary communication:

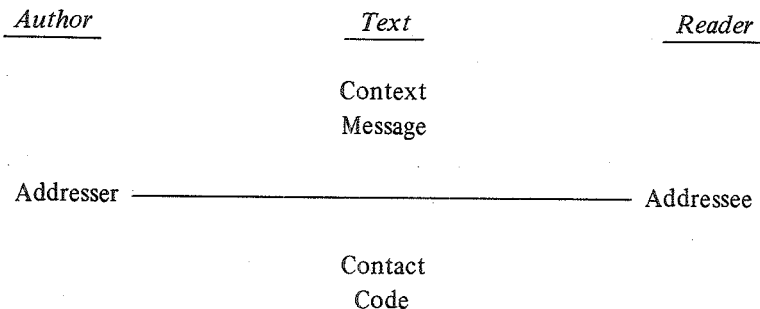


For Guillén as well as for other comparatists, the difficulty of influence study is in how to reconstruct the psychological process of transformation from the author's experience as reader to that of a creative author. In reception research, there is the same difficulty of how to reconstruct the reader-author's experience, which is of a psychological nature, in producing

text<sup>2</sup> from text 1. Since both are psychological processes, neither the literary critic nor the reception researcher as a communication studies scholar needs to be concerned with them. There is even less to do for a literary historian, who has only to recognize that literary history is an interactive process of textual production and reception, which is affected by numerous extraliterary factors. Actually, all human mental activities can be studied in relation to psychology; a literary critic, who is not a psychologist, may be concerned with it, but needs not be obsessed with it.

As has been demonstrated by Jauss, to "avoid the threatening pitfalls of psychology," a reader's reception of a literary text can be objectified into a system of expectations consisting of: first, the generic norms and themes that the text embodies and that are known to the reader; second, the reader's past reading experience; third, how the text is placed against the reader's actual experience in life. Jauss's proposal of an objectifiable system of expectations for the study and measurement of the reception of literary works from the standpoint of the readers, though it may not be perfect, is a useful methodological contribution to revitalizing reception-influence studies in comparative literature.

Jauss does not clarify the relationships among the three factors in reception and does not point out whether at a particular moment in reading one factor will dominate the other two as a major mode of interpretation. Furthermore, Jauss's scheme is concerned with the text more as a piece of literary writing than as social discourse in which social relations are embodied. In this sense, *rezeptionsästhetik* will need the assistance of expertise from other fields to help determine the position of a piece of literary writing in society and history. Jakobson's Structuralist model of communication will be able to illuminate the communication process from the addresser to the addressee via the text as a channel:





Jauss's three factors in the horizon of expectations can be reorganized under the Jakobson model as code and context, which can be literary and extraliterary. The only difference between Jauss and Jakobson is that Jauss deals with reception from the reader's viewpoint, while Jakobson focuses on the text's structure.

Jakobson thinks that in any communication event one of these elements will dominate the others. Modifying Jakobson, we can say that the effect of communication varies with the addressee's change in code and context, thus allowing different elements or structures of the text to expose themselves. Jakobson is correct in pointing out that there is structure in a text, yet from the viewpoint of communication, it is not enough just to deal with the structure of the text and ignore the participation of an active addressee. Actually different addressees in different historical periods will have different horizons of expectations, or different reception codes and contexts.

The difference in the reception of a literary work in different historical periods is a result of the change in reception code and context, which allows different elements in the text to disclose themselves. The structure of a text is not a fixed entity, though it has definite elements. It is a collection of "interpretive potentials," which are reconstructed in each reading to form a coherent, meaningful "text." Variation in interpretation is thus due to variation in the concretization of a text's "interpretive potentials," or structural elements, which function as the basis for distinguishing valid interpretations from invalid ones. In this sense, Structuralism serves to define the limits of reception studies. Valid interpretation is not a random activity but an interactive process between the text and the reader, who reconstructs the text's elements into a coherent structure according to his perception, which again has its social character. Approached in this way, the history of reception of a literary work will shed light onto the question of why there are changing views of the same work over various historical periods. It is in this sense that the study of literary history becomes meaningful to research in comparative literature. As Jauss has observed, "Only the reception, i.e., the historical life of the work in literature, reveals its structure, in an open series of aspects, through the active interrelationship between the literary work and the literary public" (Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 73). It is an attempt in blending the positivist and the aesthetic-formalist approaches to literature.

In his essay, "New Strategies in the Comparative Study of Literature

and Their Application to Contemporary Chinese Literature," Douwe W. Fokkema outlines three stages in the development of the comparative methodology: positivist, aesthetic-formalist (in Fokkema's terms, "attention to the unity and autonomy of the literary text"), and semiotic (Fokkema, 1-3). The last approach is to view the text not as a fixed entity but as "a sign or an assembly of signs, which, as carriers of potential meaning, must be actualized in an act of communication" (Fokkema, 3). This is a contribution of *rezeptionsästhetik* to comparatism. Fokkema is right in stating that the study of literary history in the light of reception and influence can be benefited from the three tasks of literary history proposed by Felix Vodička: firstly, the study of the literary text as historical actualizations of its meanings; secondly, the study of historical and social context in which literary texts are produced; and, thirdly, the study of the reception of literary texts in relation to literary and extraliterary norms (Vodička, 30-86; Fokkema, 5).

The three stages in the development of the comparative methodology can also be named after the schools which have dominated the discipline in different periods: the French, American, and German. A glance at the subject of the Nineth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association held in 1978 will witness that the German perspective has become more and more influential. It is a revolution, which occurs quietly: "no manifestoes, no marching and singing, no tumult in the streets; simply a shift in perspective, a new way of seeing what had always been there" (Suleiman and Crosman, 3).

An interesting example of different interpretations of the same work over different historical periods, as Douwe W. Fokkema and Elrud Kunne-Ibsch point out in their book *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century*, can be found in the reception of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* in Germany. When it first made its impact, the prevailing ideological and aesthetic horizon of expectations, or reception code and context, allowed the *der neue Mensch*/Jugendstil element to expose itself, while the biblical parody and aphorism were hidden. Yet in a later period when the reception code and context underwent a change with the appearance of Expressionism and Thomas Mann's works, in which the Jugendstil element is integrated with parody and aphorism. The popularity of Thomas Mann's works brought about a new reception of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* with its parodistic and biblical elements exposed to the readers and the Jugendstil element submerged (Fokkema and Kunne-Ibsch, 163-4). It is evident that in

different periods with different interpretive strategies, different structure/interpretive elements of a work are revealed. More familiar examples can be found in contemporary Chinese reception of traditional literary texts. Employing an orthodox Marxist code, critics on the Chinese mainland in the 1960s and early 70s were inclined to treating *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hung lou meng*), an eighteenth-century novel, as a mirror of class struggle in the Ch'ing dynasty. But in other Chinese communities it is considered as a work of art. Nothing is more evident in showing how the context of reception can affect the interpretation of a literary text than the mainland Chinese political re-evaluation of *Water Margin* (*Shui-hu chuan*), a fifteenth-century novel, which was associated with the political and social reality in mainland China in the mid-1970s.

In commenting upon the nineteenth-century approach to comparative literature, René Wellek testifies to the internal coherence of methodology in the study of European literature: "There is no methodological distinction between a study of the influence of Ibsen on Shaw and a study of the influence of Wordsworth on Shelley. There is no distinction between a study of the influence of Shakespeare in eighteenth-century England and of Shakespeare in eighteenth-century France" (Wellek, 1-2). When comparative literature was limited to the geographical confines of Europe, the use of critical models, or interpretive methodologies, was hardly a cultural problem, as Wai-lim Yip insightfully points out, for despite the fact that "each of these national literatures possesses strong local character and color of its own, they all share a common frame of reference on the level of perceptual and structuring activities" (Yip, 120). Anthony C. Wu also thinks that within the geographical confines of Europe however different and divergent the languages, artistic forms, and temporal epochs from which the works originated, "the grounds for comparison" are usually erected on continuities of a linguistic or cultural order in the West" (Yu, 48). It should be noted here that the dichotomy of the East and the West does not mean that the Eastern or Western culture is monolithic; nor does it mean that there is nothing common between the East and the West.

What then are the problems in literary interpretation that face a scholar in Chinese-Western comparative literature? How can a teacher determine whether or not his Chinese students' interpretation of Shakespeare is valid? In his book *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Stanley Fish proposes as a solution to this problem the concept of interpretive community: "there is a text in this and every class if one

means by text the structure of meanings that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force" (Fish, vii). Since language and value system have their social character, within a community there is relative stability of interpretation as each of the members share similar interpretive strategies.

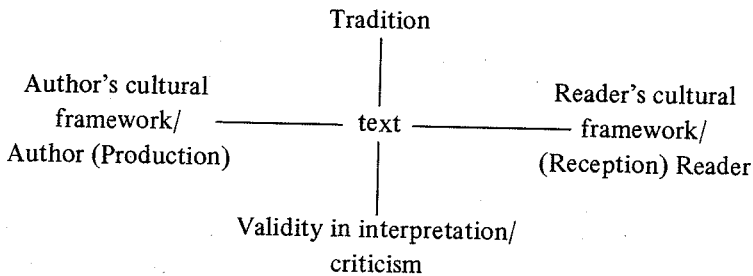
In the reception of a Western author in China, the author, the text, and reader are separated by at least two different value systems, in which case instability of the text seems inevitable. There is only culturally relative stability of the text in such a situation of intercultural interpretation. Within an intracultural interpretive community, the problem of interpretation arises only in the difference in the reader's perception. Yet in an intercultural setting, the problem becomes more complicated. In the case of the reception of Ibsen in China, what is at issue is the difference in interpretation resulting not so much from the difference in the readers' perception as from the barriers created by the divergences in culture and language (Tam, 205). The critic immediately encounters the question of validity in interpretation when he deals with intercultural literary reception. James J. Y. Liu suggests that the "critic's task as reader is to try to increase the area of interaction between the created world of the work and the world that he is re-creating from the linguistic structure of the work" (Liu, 16). But one cannot help wondering: where is the "created world of the work" other than that re-created by the reader from the linguistic structure of the work? If the "created world of the work" could be fixed, there would not be so much argument among the critics. Only in theory does the "created world of the work" exist and is it independent of human perception as what the Structuralists call structure, which still has to be concretized in the human mind in order to yield "meaning."

The most interesting thing in intercultural literary reception lies in the question of validity in the various concretizations due to the readers' difference in cultural and historical background. There are examples of contradictory interpretations that are often both valid. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* can be interpreted as a pessimistic writing concerning the frustration of waiting, or conversely as an optimistic drama about man's hope in waiting.

Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive community can be extended for greater use in the interpretation of literary texts in intracultural situations. Besides depending on the social character of language and interpretive strategies, the reader can share his interpretation with another reader through

the reference to a common critical tradition or cultural framework. If both the author and the reader share the same culture, as in European comparative literature, then the common critical tradition can be used as a criterion for determining the validity of interpretation. This is why Wellek says that there is no methodological distinction between a study of Ibsen's influence on Shaw and a study of Wordsworth on Shelley.

Despite the fact that tradition is not a monolithic and stagnant concept, members of the same tradition do share a common core of interpretive criteria based on "evidence and argument." As E. D. Hirsch, Jr., states, "Interpretive disagreements have usually been about some historical intent, not about the true nature of a tradition" (Hirsch, Jr., 214). Reference to the larger framework of critical tradition, rather than to the author's intended meaning, can thus be one of the many criteria to grant an interpretation validity:



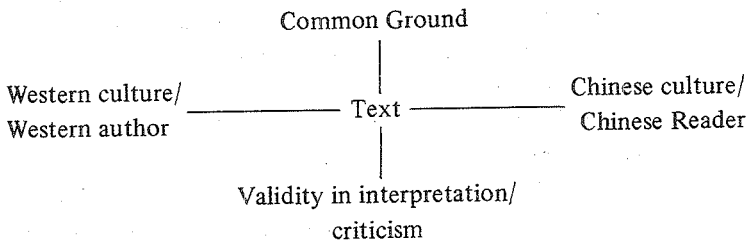
As Harold Bloom points out, a text is always an intertext: "poems are not things but only words that refer to other words, and those words refer to still other words, and so on into the densely overpopulated world of literary language. Any poem is an inter-poem, and reading of a poem is an inter-reading" (Bloom, 2-3). Tradition defined as intertextuality may serve as the basis for determining the validity of interpretation.

For an ideal reader who wants to achieve maximum validity of his interpretation, reading a text, which is historically and culturally remote from him, requires him first of all to be able to locate the text in the author's historical and cultural framework as well as to recognize the difference from his own and then to make a choice, or a compromise, between them. One of the methods to ensure validity of interpretation in intracultural study of literary works is the consistency theory. This consistency theory has its basis on the notion of intertextuality, which is

“both a name for a work’s relation to particular prior texts and an assertion that to read a work is to place it in a discursive space in relation to the various codes which are formed by the dialogue between texts and reading” (Culler, 176). The interpretation of a part of a work has to be consistent with the whole. The interpretation of a work in turn has to be consistent with other works belonging to the same category, that is, tradition. In this light, the concept of intertextuality is useful not only for the study of literary influence and reception but also for the exploration of interpretive strategies in literary study.

To the literary historian and comparatist, however, what is more interesting is perhaps not the result of ideal cultural interaction in which the reader has knowledge of both his own background and the tradition to which the author belongs, but that in which an author comes to a culture other than his own and is received through the filter of the sociocultural context and code of the recipient country. Intercultural literary reception is a process of cultural filtering as well.

In the case of a Western author’s reception in China, or in Japan, the problem of the validity of interpretation is further complicated by the absence of a larger critical tradition shared by the Chinese and the Western cultures. Since in this case it is impossible to rely on the principle of consistency with a single larger critical tradition as a framework to assure the validity of interpretation, it can only be based on the “common ground” between the Chinese and Western critical traditions as a substitute for Stanley Fish’s “interpretive community”:



Only when that Western author’s work is placed in the “common ground” between his own culture and the Chinese culture can the interpretations thus produced, however different they may be, be justified and accepted by both Western and Chinese readers. This is what James Liu calls “common poetics” in interlingual criticism, or what Wai-lim Yip calls “the overlapping

part" of Chinese and Western critical models in his article "The Use of 'Models' in East-West Comparative Literature" (Yip, 118).

For the average reader, or for scholars of other disciplines, who favours the use of literature in a special way, the problem of validity in interpretation, however, does not exist. For some critics whose purpose is not in literary communication, the author's intended meaning or the text's significance, which are both culturally conditioned, are never a problem. Thus there are such studies as "Shakespearean Drama: An Indian Perspective" and "A Chinese View of Ibsen," which are interesting as studies in cross-cultural experience and of course have their merits in their own ways. To interpret a literary text according to the criteria of another culture is always exciting and can often reveal much more about the recipient culture than about the original text. But this is what a comparatist has to avoid.

The construction of a "common ground" for intercultural interpretation has an important implication for Chinese-Western comparative literature, no matter whether it is from the approach of analogy study or reception-influence study. For analogy study, the "common ground" for interpretation gives the critic the criteria to distinguish true resemblances from false resemblances and to see the underlying structure that causes convergences as well as divergences in Chinese and Western literatures. For reception-influence study, the "common ground" will provide the comparatist the basis on which explanation of differences in cross-cultural literary reception and influence can be sought. For these reasons, both James J. Y. Liu and Wai-lim Yip are justified in their insistence on the need and unceasing effort in the pursuit of a "common poetics" for Chinese-Western comparative literature as well as for Chinese-English interlingual criticism.

If past concerns in literary study, whether they be historicist-positivist or aesthetic-formalist, are attempts to fix meaning in either the author or the text, which are based on confidence in human ability to approach the ultimate truth (if any), then the present concern of reception research is a self-reflexive act, which is due to a suspicion of the existence of such an ultimate truth independent of human perception. Reception study is more concerned with how interpretation comes about than with which interpretation is valid, although it also deals with the latter question. While it rejects the author- or text-oriented approaches, it does not deny the significance of the author and the text in literary study. It provides a synthesis of the past approaches to literary study by blending the positivist with aesthetic-formalist approaches to the study of literary history and

literary reception.

As Jauss declares in his essay, "Esthétique de la réception et communication littéraire," the aesthetics of reception has in the past twenty years developed more and more into a theory of literary communication, involving the author, text, and reading public (Jauss, 15). Focusing on the interaction between the reader and the text, reception theory reminds the comparatist to regard the reception of literature in particular historical periods as the actualization of certain aspects of the text within a prevalent system of literary and extraliterary norms. It studies the position a work occupies in the critical framework created as a result of the reader's expectations and how this position varies with the emergence of new works. It signifies a new orientation in literary study rather than a strictly-defined, thus limited and sometimes dead, methodology. It is this open-endedness in the attitude of investigation that allows it to accommodate whatever expertise other disciplines can offer.

To conclude, let me quote Harry Levin on his idea about literary theory and literary study: "As for theory, it could generalize practice into a system, not by itemizing rules but by outlining norms. It could help us to consider literature as a whole, less perhaps as a psychic adventure among masterpieces than as a sociocultural institution propagating values and sustaining continuities" (Levin, 109). He also says the following with regard to literary interpretation:

To interpret a text with due justice should be to analyze it linguistically, structurally, historically, comparatively; to keep a synchronic eye out for esthetic angles which have hitherto gone unobserved; and to retain a diachronic cognizance of what it has meant in other contexts and in variorum rereadings. Nothing need be excluded from thoughtful examination under the most flexible and pluralistic criteria, but no emergent points would be worth pursuing unless they could withstand convincing tests of internal coherence and external relevance. (Levin, 109)

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