

Twice Removed: A Matter of Interpretation

Heh-hsiang Yuan

In looking at the present state of affairs of Chinese-Western comparative literature study, one cannot help feeling that Pope's statement is almost prophetic when he decried the literary scene of his time:

Some are bewilder'd in the maze of schools,
And some made coxcombs Nature meant but fools.
In search of wit, these lose their common sense,
And then turn critics in their own defence;
Each burn alike, who can, or cannot write,
Or with a rival's, or an eunuch's spite.

(An Essay on Criticism, pt. I, 11. 27-31)

Our confusion, I think, is not caused by the lack of goals nor by the waning of enthusiasm. The appearance of the label of a Chinese school must suggest that its advocates know what they are talking about, and the mushrooming growth of approaches, theoretical as well as methodological, speaks well of the great interest generated by the discipline. The confusion is caused rather by a persistent desire in pursuing one particular approach or one special theory to the exclusion of other approaches and theories, and with such insistence tending to isolate as well as insulate a rather narrow field of research. If Chinese-Western comparative literature study is to flourish, such biased inclination must be abandoned. However, that does not suggest certain theoretical or methodological approaches should be banished. What we do need in our present state of affairs in Chinese-Western comparative literature study is extensive exposure to all possible approaches, we should nevertheless warn ourselves against the tendency of treating methodology or theory as ends rather than means. Over-emphasizing methodology at the expense of the literary text itself, in our particular case, is self-defeating. Treating the text anatomically, dissecting its parts and then fitting them into

categories to see a structural constitution may be a technical exercise to sharpen our skills at analysis. But, the ultimate aim should be more than just "exercising" our skills. Skill is "know-how," but not knowledge itself. The critical understanding and appreciation of a literary text will have to come from more sources than mere technique. To stress theory over the text also has its danger. The purpose of theory is to substantiate the text, to enhance its comprehensibility, and perhaps, to a limited extent, to shed some light on the discovery of the meaning of the text, but definitely not to replace the text. The other danger of overstressing theory and neglecting the text is the eventual emergence of prescriptive rules, dictating the manner of appreciation, and even prescribing the ways and aims of artistic creativity. Then literature and artistic creativity lose their independence and become subject to ideological control. Against the accusation that such an argument denies the social function of literature, my defence is that in advocating the independence of art (including literature), I do not deny the moral and social forces it can exercise; however, I do wish to point out that such influences being attributed to any theory may more than often lead to political control and a self-assumed sense of moral virtue, when they become oppressive and dangerous. We witness this tendency in almost all revolutionary literature:

French revolutionary writing always proclaimed a right founded on bloodshed or moral justification, whereas from the very start Marxist writing is presented as the language of knowledge. Here writing is univocal, because it is meant to maintain the cohesion of a Nature; it is the lexical identity of this writing which allows it to impose a stability in its explanations and a permanence in its method; it is only in the light of its whole linguistic system that Marxism is perceived in all its political implications. Marxist writing is as much given to understatement as revolutionary writing is to grandiloquence, since each word is no longer anything but a narrow reference to the set of principles which tacitly underlie it.¹

Only when the state of literary studies reaches a point at which the art of criticism develops into an independent discipline, does it become possible to stress the force of theory in a descriptive and discursive vein, as Wellek and Warren did in their *Theory of Literature*.

The difficulty that confronts the art of persuasion is always there when speculation contains within itself two inherently contradictory propositions.

Here the situation is exactly that. On the one hand, I wish to deny traditionalists their sole right to truth in literary studies; on the other hand, I also hope to caution against the monolithic tendency of some of the advocates of modern theories in their well-intentioned but misguided pursuit of dominance in Chinese-Western comparative literature study. A proper recognition of the virtues and vices of both the old and the new, accompanied by a mutual tolerant and receptive attitude may bring us new light in our path of literary endeavours, and help us to truly reach the point where the East and the West shall meet, and the discipline of Chinese-Western comparative literature will indeed become a part of the large family of comparative literature studies.

In discussing the aesthetics of reception, Steven Mailloux quoted Wellek's two tasks of a literary historian as

the "tracing of the development of works of art" in terms of genres, styles, and the like, and the description of the historical "process of interpretation, criticism, and appreciation" of the work's structure which changes "while passing through the minds of readers, critics, and fellow-artists."²

He suggested that in Wellek's definition of the tasks, equal importance was given to "histories of production and reception." We are not concerned with Mailloux's criticism of Wellek's giving dominance to the history of production in the general discussion of literary history; our concern here is with the implications of the two tasks. "Tracing the development of works of art in terms of genres, styles, and the like" seems to point to the intrinsic aspect of a literary work, and has as its occupation the objective of studying the "process of production" and the "internal structure" of the literary work. This positions one more or less in the traditionalist's path of literary studies, and has naturally certain limitations. For one, it conditions a work to a set of "agreed upon" rules which resulting from a univocal belief. This can be clearly seen in the prominence of the numerology concept in all medieval artistic, religious, and even architectural compositions. The "mystique of numbers" can stretch as far back as to the "very beginnings of speech itself." As Honorius speaks of man as "id est minus mundus appellatur" (he is called a lesser world), he actually argues that "man's voice has seven tones because as a microcosm he is consonant with the heavenly spheres."³ Through early Chaldean astrology, Pythagorean lore, and Platonic treatise, a tradition of numbers was formulated, which considerably dominated the

mind of the medieval world. Number for the medievalists, theologians, philosophers, musicians, and artists, "provided a way of abstracting general principles from Nature. Things measured by the same numbers were thought to be in some way correspondent."⁴ It was firmly believed that "through the numbered analogies in Creation . . . man might share in truth, even though he cannot fully understand it. Knowledge of Creation's patterning enables the mind to cope with flux and, through discourse with God's forms, answer to some extent, at least, the otherwise unanswerable."⁵

St. Augustine defined music (*De musica*) as the "science of good modulation," meaning that it is concerned with "the relating of several musical units according to a module, a measure, in such a way that the relation can be expressed in simple arithmetical ratios."⁶ By such relational ratios, he set up a hierarchical order of values and applied it to the judgement of music. Musical understanding, according to him, can be intrinsic and its production can be practical, but such understanding of music, "however creative or receptive, is but of a low order," and is not much different from the "understanding" of a "singing bird," and is "vulgar." Good music is mathematical. The numbers or ratios work in a gradual ascending order; the most admirable ratio is that of "equality or symmetry, the ratio 1:1, since here the union or consonance between the two parts is most intimate. Next in rank are the ratios 1:2, 2:3, and 3:4 — the intervals of the perfect consonances, octave, fifth, and fourth." What is worth noting here is that Augustine did not derive his evaluation scales "from their aesthetic or acoustic qualities," but rather from the "audible echoes" of the metaphysical perfection that Pythagorean mysticism ascribes to number, especially to the four numbers of the first "tetractys" (tetractis). His conception of number is based on necessity, as he considers that "without the principate of number, the cosmos would return to chaos," for God "hast ordered all things in measure and number and weight."⁷

Architecture, according to Augustine, like music, also mirrors "eternal harmony." The aesthetic implications are obvious. Von Simson suggests that there are positive aspects of this theory of aesthetics, but when further elaborated by Boethius, the concept "confined the entire creative process, from the first design to the completed composition, within the rigid limits not only of metaphysical doctrine but of certain mathematical laws."⁸ Augustine's authority not only shaped but also dominated the Middle Ages; the interpretation of the passage from the *Wisdom of Solomon* quoted above became "the keyword of the medieval world view." And this world view, as

E. R. Curtius has shown, is also reflected "in the content as well as the form of medieval poetry."⁹

In the study of Chinese literature, similar explication can be made, though based on different philosophical tenets. Basically, the literature in the period up to the Han Dynasty can be described as under the Confucian (Ju Chia) interpretive or evaluative dictum. P'u Shang's 卜商 "Grand Preface to Poetry" (*Shih ta-hsu* 詩大序) summarises the limits imposed on literary creativity. It is an idealistic vision based on an empirical and moral perspective that governs and judges the merit of a work of art. P'u Shang's edificatory remark of "righting the human relationships" echoes the Confucian concept of *ch'i chia* 齊家, "to bring harmony to the family," which is the middle point that links the individual to the universal. The full growth of the individual starts from "observing things thoroughly" (*kê-wu* 格物);¹⁰ this leads to knowledge (*chih-chih* 致知), which resulting in "true conviction" (*ch'en-hsin* 誠心) sets the mind righteous (*cheng-i* 正意); only then can one "cultivate his personality" (*hsiu-shen* 修身) and thus be able to "bring harmony to the family." This is the first order of the moral hierarchy, initiated from an empirical process reaching a moral goal, which is also practical. The second order covers the family, the nation, and the world. From the basis of harmonious relationship within the family, the nation is ruled and eventually universal peace is achieved. Therefore, idealism is always based on practical needs. The significance lies in the assumption that "the pursuit of reason," based on empirical knowledge, eventually leads to a perfect and rationalized world. Such moralistic conviction indeed has affected the whole interpretive mood of literature in the classical period, until the *yin-yang wu hsing* 陰陽五行 concept, together with mysticism and Buddhism, breaks the monopoly in the late Han and Wei-Chin period.

The empirical foundation of the classical Chinese moral and philosophical concept manifests itself in *Chou Kuan* 周官, a book setting the governmental system reflective of the political idealism of the usurper Wang Mang 王莽 and his followers. The numerical concept of 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 sets a system which mirrors *fa-chia* 法家 (legalist) ideas modified by Confucian thoughts.¹¹

The second task, observing the "process of interpretation, criticism, and appreciation" of the works which change "while passing through the minds of readers, critics, and fellow-artists," points toward the reception of literature. By the mere statement that works change "while passing through the minds of readers, critics, and fellow-artists" one may assume that there can be many

views and interpretations, each with its own argument and justification, presenting what it considers to be valid, attempting to convince those who are exposed to such a view or interpretation. Such speculation allows diversity and a pluralistic tolerance which, though it has its limitations, is nevertheless healthy. In our present scene of Chinese-Western comparative literature study, a newly emerging field (in comparison with American and European comparative literature studies), we need to test all possibilities. The task is truly taxing, and needs all the cooperative efforts we can muster. However, our experience tells us that in the supposedly common pursuit more dust has been kicked up which has prevented us from seeing the future in a clearer perspective. The situation, nevertheless, is different from ten years ago when the National Comparative Literature Association was first founded. Then, it was total confusion, with everyone enthused about comparative literature and pursuing the subject in whatever way he or she saw fit, though Wai-lim Yip's theory of model, C. H. Wang's new interpretation of heroism in Chinese epic, Yuan-Shu Yen's introduction of new criticism (which was perhaps the earliest to be introduced to the scene), and Jack Deeney's compilation and presentation of Western traditional theoretical concepts of comparative literature, did bring a moment of prosperity to the field. The blooming of the field was less orderly, however, lacking the kind of discourse or dialogue which would channel the enthusiasm into a direction that would assure the durability of the discipline. Such enduring existence does not suggest the offering of a study in a university curriculum or occasional publications of books and essays, but rather it means a consistent development of literary study in all forms normally attributed to such a discipline. Not only does it suggest this, but also implies a certain sense of total acceptance by the traditional schools of literary studies. The direction of pluralism seems to aim itself exactly at that, in our particular case. Welles's definition of the tasks of a literary historian has inadvertently revealed an essential need in our discipline, which appears to be able to meet the demands of both the traditionalist and the modern in literary studies. The significance of "tracing . . . the development of works of art" is self-evident and needs no further explanation. The difficulty, as pointed out earlier, lies in describing the "process of interpretation, criticism, and appreciation" of the works of art "while passing through the minds of readers, critics, and fellow-artists." In what way can we achieve a consensus of opinions or interpretations that would give assurance to the historically minded that the new interpretation, though unfamiliar to the traditional explanation, is an enriching discovery rather than a total disregard

and, consequently, a complete replacement of an established literary tradition?

One cause of apprehension resulting from departure from established interpretations is confusion of meaning. To many, the deviation from a set of established rules in interpreting the meaning of a work of art would send the reader into the abyss of eternal confusion and darkness. This is particularly true for the "novice" in the field. An example may illustrate the point. In admitting freshmen to our university, we usually conduct an oral interview after the applicants have successfully passed a written examination on five or six subjects. During the interview, a particular poem or passage taken from a standard text, without showing the title, would be given to the applicants to read, and then questions would be asked. One time, the poem selected was Tennyson's "The Eagle." Interpretations ranged from "Christ coming down from heaven to the world to save mankind" to "a tiger falling off a cliff into the ocean"; none were able to identify correctly the object being described. Responses also varied from the traditional analysis of the verse form and prosody to never-imagined thematic projection. Each interpreted the poem according to his or her own inclination, affected or influenced naturally by cultural or religious orientation. The experience reminds one of Wayne C. Booth's discussion of the "plurality of modes" in reading Auden's "Surgical Ward." The problem one faces is how to walk out of the maze of so many interpretations without being confused. Booth, not knowingly, provided us a partial answer when he remarked,

the pluralist we seek, though he will see each critic's conclusions indeed as relative, will relate them, not to something outside that critic's process of reasoning, but to the kind of inquiry he has engaged in and to the quality of the endeavor he brings to it.¹²

One question inevitably remains: how do we reconcile all different interpretations? Being a pluralist does not mean being self-contradictory in one's acceptance of theoretical speculations. Perhaps, we can agree with Booth again; "in practice," a pluralist is one who expects "that some controversies will lead to a both/and resolution rather than an either/or" one, recognising that "conflicting conclusions were related back to their intellectual sources, sharply contrasting modes proved both sound" and indeed work for an eventual solution that will accommodate all differences. The initial stage, however, must be babelistic as Babelism is preferred to monism in Chinese-western comparative literature study. One should bear in mind that it is

wrong to expect "to settle issues with a single resolution," nor should one consider that a "single resolution, however complex in structure, is both desirable and attainable."¹³ Such being the case, the compelling need of modern methodology and theory in the field must bear the mark of accommodating flexibility, avoiding a total rejection of traditional scholarship regarded by many Chinese scholars as the "only possible way to "truth"; the "desirable and attainable" solutions can and should be found.

One possible controversy over the study of Chinese-Western comparative literature study is whether we ought to start from a theoretical or a textual basis. The traditionalist's (the label is for the sake of convenience) choice would be the latter. The argument against that approach is that such a study would lead to random comparison, which would not help to establish the discipline, not to say further develop it. Can we compare works in isolation from their larger cultural, social, philosophical or historical context? With two literatures of so drastically different backgrounds, this would not be possible. But, does that mean we should super-impose on one literature a theoretical pattern which is culturally and philosophically so alien to it and bring it into the fold of comparative literature studies? The act would be so much against the grain of a native cultural integrity that it would only result in antagonism rather than in harmony. We are warned not to overlook the cultural role in the study of Chinese-Western comparative literature. However, the concern here is not with the problem of whether human cultures are created by meaning or by practical needs and functions; this is a question to be debated by an anthropologist or a sociologist. But, we can perhaps agree on one point, that is, that culture is made in the sharing of symbolic meanings. However limited this speculation may be, it can serve as an initiating point for the dialogue.

We can also say that all cultures make great works and preserve them as valuable endeavours by their great geniuses. "In large part that is what a culture is — a kind of creation and preservation of works first composed and then understood."¹⁴ The statement is referring, in particular, to literary or artistic works, and the emphatic point is "understood."

Understanding quite often means different things to different people with different cognizance. Traditionalists and modernists part ways here. It is indeed unfair to say that the modernists do not pay attention to the text. They view the text, however, within a specific framework of a specific theoretical or methodological reference; the literary work must fit into a larger linguistic, or sociological, or psychological pattern, thus ruling out the

possibility that a work may not fall into any of these categories. For instance, Stein Haugom Olsen, in discussing "The *Meaning* of a Literary Work,"¹⁵ took his reader away from both the Aristotelian and the Freudian interpretations, and suggested that tragic meaning came from the change of perspective. He suggested that "one possible way" of solving the major paradox of "seeing blindness/blind seeing" would be "to distinguish between human and divine insight." Oedipus, the protoman, relying on his power of "deduction and inference," which helped him to solve the riddle of the sphinx, believes in his intellectual ability to also solve the problem of Laius' murder without knowing that the problem of Laius' murder is radically different from the riddle of the sphinx. The riddle of the sphinx requires "the ability to observe and combine facts . . . and nothing else." "The answer to the riddle constitutes a piece of general knowledge: knowledge of properties shared by all men, by all the individuals of a species. This type of knowledge is impersonal; it does not involve reference to the individual who possesses it."¹⁶ But, the knowledge of Laius' murder and murderer constitutes a "particular knowledge, knowledge about the single individual" and it is a "knowledge of relationships," which is dependent upon one's knowledge of oneself. "The individual is woven into a social and religious web which he observes from his individual point of view." Therefore, "self knowledge provides the perspective which determines the perception of other people's position in this social and religious structure." If one fails to know oneself in that context, "exact observation and sound inference will be of no help" to him to reach the proper or correct conclusions. Oedipus' lack of such self knowledge resulting in his failure to change his perspective is the cause of the tragedy. This makes the play neither psychological, nor sociological (or any other), but very much individual in a unique way.

A comparative study of *Tou Ou Yuan* 竇娥冤 and Western drama brings out still another example. Tou Ou's tragedy does not fit into any of the set categories we find in serious tragedy in the West. It is certainly not psychological, neither is it political; the most one may say is that it verges on the social. The Aristotelian theory does not apply to its analysis nor to its criticism; the catharsis, if there is any, is close to bathos; we feel neither warned nor purified at the end of our reading of the play. There is no change of perspective on the part of the character. Tou Ou does not possess the kind of intellectual ability which Oedipus possesses; there is no clear sense of identity; there is no minute description of emotional crisis; there is only extreme suffering unrelated to the internal struggle of the individual. The

most one can say is that the play can be viewed (and I think it is being viewed that way) as a diatribe against a not-very-clearly-explained injustice. A thematic study of the play, bearing in mind its particular social and historical backgrounds, together with an analysis of its prosodic characteristics perhaps may help us to understand the play in the right context. Further exaggeration of its significance would be fallacious.

In *Tou Ou Yuan*, there is no paradox of the levels of meaning as one finds in *Oedipus the King*; there is no "divine versus the intellectual" theme. In *Oedipus the King*, the divine insight revealed through divination is "blind in the sense that no appeal is made to observation or to the power of human intellect to illuminate observation."¹⁷ The revealed knowledge — "knowing nothing" — leads to a different truth which is prophetic and which rests "on the reading of signs and the interpretation of oracles."¹⁸ This part, to a limited extent, we may find in *Tou Ou Yuan*. At the end of *Tou Ou Yuan*, the divine revelation vindicates or rectifies the human suffering. However, it does not explain away the problem because no explanation is needed. The conflict is not one between the divine force and the human intellect. Suffering is total but not complex as it does not involve the debate of the mind; therefore, its extremity is difficult to comprehend. Oedipus' suffering is total and complex. If "perfect suffering" exists, this is it; one suffers in body, mind and soul.

Some may argue that the discussion of Oedipus and Tou Ou may just be a matter of interpretation. And since it is a matter of interpretation, many versions can be expected. Assuming that the meaning of a literary work depends on interpretation, and interpretation, as we know, exists in plural number, then authoritative explanation of a text is indeed difficult.

Perhaps it is inadequate to ask, in the study of Chinese-Western comparative literature, whether we should start from a theoretical or textual basis. Jeffrey Stout suggests that we may want to start from a different angle by asking different questions. He suggests that a reader may be interested in several factors while reading a work. The reader may be interested in (a) what the author planned to convey, (b) what might be called extrinsic intentions, (c) what propositions the author wished to communicate, (d) what was the proper identification of a purposeful linguistic performance (ideological propaganda fomenting revolutions), (e) what was the intended reference, or any other elements. Abstracting from these possibilities posed by Stout, one may construe some common bases upon which certain principles regarding Chinese-Western comparative literature studies can be constructed. Such

conclusions, if they are indeed conclusions, should not be considered infallible. For instance, what Stout has suggested in the above categories points towards (1) the intention of the author, (2) the manner through which such intention is conveyed, and (3) the effect such intention produced. A comparison of two works of very different cultural or philosophical backgrounds such as Chinese and Western may present very dissimilar results when the findings are based on detailed analytical study. Such findings normally should not create any insurmountable problems if we are not looking for a uniform answer that can be applied to both literatures. If our concern is of an abstract principle rather than of matching details, we can certainly build a bridge crossing the two culturally disparate literatures and draw beneficial comparisons. For example, in the study of oral literature, attention has been drawn to the application of the formulaic principle to the analytical study of *Shih Ching* 詩經 (*The Book of Poetry*) and other Chinese literary works.¹⁹ No matter how limited these studies are, they nevertheless represent new adventures into new areas. And certainly they are worthwhile endeavours.

Todorov argues for the functionality of language, suggesting that "the meaning of a literary element consists in the possibilities for function which we give that element. A word, a metaphor, (or) a dialogue . . . has that meaning which it acquires through mutual relations with other elements in that particular text. The interpretation thus depends on the personality of the reader, who picks the element out of the whole context, and fits it into a new system . . . thus assessing it according to his own standards."²⁰ This argument brings the whole matter of meaning into a new realm. Meaning no longer possesses any intrinsic independence; the Platonic "idea" no longer exists. There is no separation between meaning and interpretation; the "idea" is not to be imitated as no "imitation" is needed; interpretive expression is meaning itself. This also removes literature from its imitative role to a new position as the reader has replaced the author; and reader-response, the meaning of the text. The classical dictum of "content stipulating form" no longer applies.

Stanley Fish argues still another way. He suggests a transfer of "responsibility from the text to its reader" as a way to solving the problem of meaning.²¹ For him, there is no a priori of the text; "meaning" is to be defined in experiential terms. It is what happens to a reader as he "negotiates" the text, not "something already in place before he has experienced it." By denying the claim of objectivity to the text, he feels that one is able to be in an "honest position" to ascertain the meaning of the text, as one pretends to no

knowledge that is really unavailable to him.²² He does not deny that "the efforts of readers are always efforts to discern and therefore to realize" an author's intention. However, he emphatically stresses that this attempt to "discern" and to "realize" the author's intention is an act in the present progressive tense; it is in "the sense of becoming." He argues that the realization (of meaning) should not be "conceived narrowly, as the single act of comprehending an author's purpose, rather than . . . as the succession of acts readers perform in the continuing assumption that they are dealing with intentional beings."²³

Perhaps it is unfair just to cite Fish so briefly without mentioning others like Gibson, Riffaterre, Poulet, and Iser in discussing the issue of reader-response criticism. But, my concern here is not a discussion of the details of reader-response concept but rather its implications. One implication, to me, is the denial of the independence of the text or its meaning. Such a denial makes objective evaluation or criticism impossible. This approach has considerably affected the classical criteria for criticism, which we normally attribute to the mimetic tradition.

However, considering the speculation in a theoretical sense, the concept of reader-response can be just as validly applied to the study of Chinese literature as it can be applied to the study of Western literature. If such a speculative basis can be established, there is no reason why Chinese-Western comparative literature studies cannot have another "dimension." But, in reality, the application may not be that easy. In the West, I believe, the emergence of a new theory often can be a response or reaction to an old established concept, or it may be a deviation, a branch off from or a further development of a main theoretical trend. Modern theoretical studies can verify that. In China, the development of critical theories has yet to witness such a turn. The present blossoming occurrence of modern theories as applied to the study of Chinese literary works, both classical and modern, may seem to suggest a contradiction to the statement. But, a more soul-searching investigation can perhaps help the real issue to surface. The prevailing mood of new theories and new methodologies appears more technical than critical or evaluative. One may, however, say that the modern trend does not separate the two, and that its intention is both. We, nevertheless, insist that an evaluative scale be set up in order to take into consideration the special elements of time and place which are conditioned by a prevailing cultural-social-philosophical temperament. For instance, would a structuralist approach to *Tou Ou Yuan* 竇娥冤 bring new meaning

to the play without taking it out of its cultural and historical contexts? Are we going to study the play by a structural analysis and overlook its social and philosophical implications? If so, we miss totally a significant sense of "order" constituted in a particular philosophical temperament within a special social and historical context, which is characteristically revealing the corresponding relationship between the human and the divine in a particular age. Querying the study of the play in such a way, one can regain some moral or social consciousness of Kuan Han Ch'ing's time regarding human and divine justice. Reading *Tou Ou Yuan*, one is often reminded of Shakespeare's *King Lear* or *Hamlet*, in which the cathartic effect lies in the ending when the deaths of the main tragic characters bring about the universal equilibrium and restore the "proper" order in both the social and the "intellectual" senses. The Shakespearean plays express the final vindication of a Renaissance concept of the universal hierarchical order micro-cosmically reflected in the human world in all its relationships. The same reflection can be found in *Tou Ou Yuan*.

Technically speaking, *Tou Ou Yuan* cannot be compared to Shakespeare's *King Lear* or *Hamlet*; it lacks the tight structure, the plot tension, the emotional suspense, and the tragic purifying effect. However, it would be unfair to raise such a judgement about a play written at a time when there was hardly any "systematic" theoretical treatment of the genre. Whatever interpretation we may give to the play, it should be "restrained" by certain objective elements, such as the author's background, the social and political factors, and the very literary trend of a special period.

The implication of reading without the explication of the text in a restrictive measure (meaning observing some restraints such as historical and social factors) more than often shifts the focus of reading from the meaning of the text to the individual process of reading, and to what such a process of reading dictates to us. This could lead to certain misleading prejudices. The reader, when assuming the role of both the reader and the interpreter (e.g. a classroom teacher, or a critic, or a reviewer, or all these), can often be influenced by his or her personal interests or purposes, which may very well be different from those of the author. If we base our assumption on an author-interpreter-communicator axis, we can then define the role of the reader into the following two: (1) the authoritative interpreter, who is also an aggressive reader, and who interprets a literary work to the public or to a group of students; (2) the common or ordinary reader, who is also a passive reader, and who reads a literary work under the influence of the so-called

authoritative reviews or interpretations. Such an assumption provides an "overlapping" between the interpreter's and the reader's concern, and helps to establish a kind of "agreement" which can be of various levels forming an evaluative scale that can be adopted as "standards." This leads to another implication, that of consensus.

Consensus signifies some kind of interpretive understanding among a group of readers of a text regarding the restraint of rules, the selection of relative factors, and the adoption of critical criteria. Free and unrestrained interpretation, under such conditions, will have to be reined in.

In the study of classical Chinese literature, the statement "readings are either creative or superfluous" has very limited validity. The creative reading of classical Chinese literature, if it exists at all, will have to be restrained by certain elements. For instance, in reading early works up to the late Han period, one will have to take into consideration the effect on these works created by Confucianism and Taoism. In the later development of *pien-wen* 變文 literature, the influence of Buddhism cannot be overlooked; the stylistic combination of *san-wen* 散文 (prose), *p'ien-wen* 駢文 ("pairing" style), and *yün-wen* 韻文 (rhythmic prose) marked a new development in both the content and the form of a literary genre and made possible the births of such generic works as *hua-peng* 話本 literature, *chu-kung-tiao* 諸宮調, *pao-chuan* 寶卷, *t'an-tzu* 彈詞, and *ku-tzu* 鼓詞.²⁴ The stylistic inconsistency in *pien-wen* literature indeed violated the classical rule governing the judgement of literary excellence.²⁵ On the other hand, it also brought new life to Chinese literature. One has to bear in mind this development as related to a historical moment when a particular "alien" element was infused into the form and content of a native literature. But, in the process of infusion, there was also assimilation. Thus, in this particular case of the development of Chinese literature, the native literature and the alien influence, instead of opposing each other, complemented each other; they "mingled." Readers of these literary works should not neglect the special historical circumstances under which this particular genre of literature was formulated. Such an "understanding" forms part of the criteria through which a reader interprets and evaluates a work.

A more predominant trend in the present stage of Chinese-Western comparative literature studies is the structuralist analysis of literary works, which indicates the adoption of an approach that applies Western methodology and theory to the study of Chinese literature. I shall not dispute the merit of such an approach; however, I would like to caution against the indiscriminate

application of such a measure. Structuralism has not been viewed as a school of thought nor as a movement. "Structuralism as a whole is based upon the view that such linguistic concepts, and those related to them, can serve to elucidate not only linguistic problems but also philosophical, literary, and social science problems, as well as problems concerning the theory of science."²⁶ It is thought that through this way of thinking "an adequate solution" to many problems as mentioned can be "achieved." We, therefore, can view the whole approach with an intellectual concern, which, of course, allows some philosophical discussion of its implications. Viewing it as a conceptual development, one can see how totally different it is from existentialism, which is another concept together with structuralism that has influenced greatly the modern world. Existentialism considers man "self-sufficient;" the structuralist view finds him "for most part . . . an element of a more extensive system." So, instead of speaking of man as a creature of self-sufficiency and freedom, it speaks of him as "entangled in and fettered to the structure." The development has, therefore, a cultural significance. Does our adoption of such a methodological approach in the study of Chinese literature imply a similar temperament in the cultural development?

The effect of methodology should verge on a conceptual break through, forming a theoretical speculation that either alters the conventional evaluative standards or results in new literary genres. In the former case, the resulting criteria will have to be substantiated by their acceptability to the native literary scene. In both cases, the "discourse" between those who hold traditional views and those who hold the "novel view" should continue. Otherwise, the "alien" nature of the novel will prevent its profitable assimilation into an ailing culture and fail to give the latter a "forward push." Again, take the illustration from the introduction of Buddhist concepts to China. The assimilation of Buddhism into Chinese culture has effected new developments in all fields. In literature, it has led to the emergence of *p'ien-wen*; in art, *p'ien-hsiang* 變相; in philosophy, Zen or *ch'an* 禪, which again affected the style of painting²⁷ and initiated the unique use of contrast of intense and light ink shade in landscape painting;²⁸ in literary criticism, Liu Hsieh's treatment of *sheng-li-shuo* 神理說;²⁹ in language, the formulation of the four-tone (*ssu-sheng* 四聲) concept, which in turn helped to develop the rhythmical and "pairing" styled prose and the patterned or regulated verse (*lü-shih* 律詩).³⁰ The caution focuses on the fusion between the native or traditional and the new; any disregard of the relationship will remove us from a true understanding of our "object" and fails us in our

pursuit of Chinese-Western comparative literature study.

A further example of the importance of "understanding" in this sense is found in the architectural development of the West. In order to understand the *raison d'être* of the richly decorated arcades and the sculptured portals of the Gothic buildings of the Middle Ages, one must see the whole matter in its historical setting. It was the poverty and the incompetence of the Romanesque style in its "infancy" that produced the ingenuity of the Gothic vault. As "all styles of architecture are based on what has gone before," the Romanesque architect modeled after his Roman predecessors in constructing his buildings. "But the expensive character of Roman work, constructed with huge stones, colossal walls, and vaults of scientific construction, the work of wealthy princes with an unlimited command of labour and materials, and possessed of all the known science of their time, made it hopelessly beyond his power of imitation."³¹ He fashioned of "small stones and rude appliances the best version he could." "He could neither quarry nor work" "the great stones of the Roman." He had to devise a "system of subordination of orders in the arch." This new system played a leading role in all "subsequent architecture." And in our particular area of discussion, it created a new decorative and aesthetic art:

Instead of the large voussoirs of the Roman which reached from side to side of the arch through the thickness of the wall, he learned to build the arch with little stones, in two or three successive rings, and still further to economize by recessing each ring within that outside it. This introduced at once an aesthetic motive. Pleased with the concentric shadows cast by his receding rings or orders he set to work to decorate them by moulding the square edges of the stones, and thus led the way to the richly decorated arcades, and the sculptured portals of the Middle Ages.³²

It is true that interpretation of historical facts often may vary with each interpreter and each era, but such a possibility should not prevent us from distinguishing historical facts from their interpretations. Confusion of the two causes misunderstanding. What is historically factual as conditioned by the geographical and periodical elements should not be viewed as interpretive consciousness, which is contingent upon another kind of spatial and temporal limitations, within which the interpreter operates. To search for new interpretive meaning of a work of art is progress in the advancement of

learning, but the search must not be at the expense of history. History has its validity. To understand the nature of history and the function of history is essential to reaching an intellectual recognition of the evolution of tradition. Without that understanding, we commit an intellectual sin, and cut ourselves from the very umbilical cord to the source of our mental sustenance.

In stressing the significance of the discourse concerning the role the traditional view occupied in literary studies, we should avoid the "trap" of confusing "the reconstructed past" with our goal of the future. The past, in its pure historical sense, if that sense ever existed, leads a fossilised existence, and therefore should never be accorded a prophetic role, stipulating rules or standards which govern the future development of literary or artistic creativity, or the formulation of standards for critical evaluation. On the other hand, we must also avoid being dominated by the kind of "methodological determinism" that seems to prevail in our present engagement of literary studies in our discipline. Traditional views have their value when properly treated. C. T. Hsia has pointed this out in his article "Chinese Novel and American Critics," grouping David T. Roy, Andrew Plaks and the other critics together as having "increasingly turned to the traditional commentators for guidance, making possible the sudden currency of such early seventeenth-century critics as Ching Sheng-t'an 金聖嘆, Mao Tsung-kan 毛宗崗, and Chang Chu-p'o 張竹坡."³³ This is an attempt to advocate the understanding of literary works produced in a certain historical period. And the effort is, as Wellek suggested, to try to establish "the exact position of each work in a tradition." This, to him and to us as well in our study of classical literature, is the "first task." Before we get down to the analytical investigation of a work, we should take a text and "locate" it "in the developing context of a literary movement," thus positioning the work in its proper historical "place" in order to comprehend its full significance. However, in being receptive to traditional views we should constantly remind ourselves that cultural temperament is not and cannot be static if it wishes to survive the onslaught of time and continue to grow. Therefore, a word of caution to the traditionalist is proper and advisable.

The traditionalist's attitude toward literature is often prescriptive and evaluative. The virtue of this attitude is two-fold: (a) making a precise distinction within a work, and (b) at the same time, raising the work to the level of abstraction and general value. It is a move which heads "simultaneously to finer points, with reference to the text and more abstract points with reference to the value of the text."³⁴ Within certain limits, such as

generic, modal, or authorial conventions which constitute rules of evaluation, a reader or a critic of a literary work can "define" more exactly how the work succeeded or did not succeed in "its general relation to the established" canon. This, of course, assumes that the reader is always attempting to do one of several things in his reading: he either approves of the work (positive reaction), or disapproves of the work (negative reaction), or neither approves nor disapproves of the work (neutral response). A traditionalist usually assumes only the first two responses, because he believes that he is guided by "tested literary standards, based on thorough knowledge of traditional literary conventions"; therefore, his response to a work is conceived in a "descriptive knowledge" which has turned into "prescriptive rules." The danger, of course, lies exactly in this development from the "descriptive" conception to the "prescriptive" projection, and prescriptive stipulations often retard growth. This suggests another "removal" from the goal of our discipline, assuming that we agree on our goal being that Chinese-Western comparative literature study is to ascertain the value of a native literary work first in its cultural context, and then to extend that value to a broader exposure so that further development is possible. The second step calls for the transference from the specific to the general, from the concrete to the abstract. This has yet to be achieved. The central issue is, therefore, not either/or but both/and. Perhaps the distinction or argument between the traditional and the new approach to the study of Chinese-Western comparative literature as relegated to the two areas of text and theory is phenomenal rather than substantial, an issue created more for the sake of argument than for the advancement of learning. We should recognise that academic discussion or dispute aimed at promoting understanding of the subject matter under investigation is never harmful; the uttermost concern, however, must be the communication of ideas, avoiding prejudicial dogmatism. In our search, we can indeed agree with Leibniz; we have come to "the conclusion that most of the received doctrines can be taken in a right sense. So that I wish clever men would seek to satisfy their ambition rather by building and making progress than by going back and destroying."

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (N.Y.: Hill & Wang, 1968), pt. 1, p. 23.
2. Steven Mailloux, *Interpretative Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1982).

3. Quoted from *De Imagine Mundi Libri Tres* by Russell A. Peck in "Numberology and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Mosaic*, 4 (1972).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
6. Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1964), ch. 2: "Measure and Light."
7. "The Wisdom of Solomon," *Apocrypha*, 9.20.
8. Von Simson, p. 23.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
10. Here I follow Chu Hsi's interpretation of *ke* 格, meaning "to exhaust the meaning (*li* 理) of things" 窮至事物之理是為格物。
11. Hsü Fu-kuan 徐復觀, *Chou-kuan ch'en-li chih shih-tai chi ch'i ssu-hsiang hsin-ke* 周官成立之時代及其思想性格. (Taipei: Hsueh-sheng Book Co., 1970).
12. Wayne C. Booth, *Critical Understanding*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 27.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
14. *Ibid.*, Preface, p. xi.
15. *NLH*, 14, 1 (Autumn 1982), 13-32.
16. Olsen, p. 28.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
19. C. H. Wang, *The Bell and the Drum, Shih Ching as Formulaic Poetry in an Oral Tradition* (Taipei edition, 1975); Hans Frankle, "The Formulaic Language of the Chinese Ballad, *Southeast Fly the Peacocks*," *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology*, 39, No. 2 (Jan. 1969), 219-44.
20. Jan. M. Brockman, *Structuralism: Moscow-Prague-Paris* (Dordrecht-Holland / Boston-U.S.A.: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1974), p. 73.
21. Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum," in *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. by Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 164-84.
22. Jane P. Tompkins, "Introduction."
23. Fish, p. 174.
24. 張曼濤主編, 佛教與中國文學, "變文與中國文學" (台北: 大乘文化出版社, 1980)。
25. See above quoted: 章太炎論駢文、散文之短長以定文格。
26. Brockman, ch. 1, "The Structuralist Endeavour."
27. In Cheng Hsüeh's view, Chinese landscape painting before the T'ang Dynasty had a tendency towards presenting the details, stressing the human figure and the buildings, yet neglecting the proper sense of proportion. See 鄭昶, 中國畫學全史: 「蓋山水畫自唐之前, 大抵群峰之勢, 若細飾犀櫛; 或水不容泛, 或人大於山。一幅之中, 惟人物或臺閣長見」。
28. 蔣勳 "大乘思想影响中國佛教藝術," 載於張曼主編, 佛教與中國文化 (台北: 大乘文化出版社, 1978)。
29. See Jao Tsung-yi 饒宗頤, "Liu Hsieh's Literary Thoughts and Buddhism" 劉勰文藝思想與佛教, 佛教與中國文學 (台北: 大乘文化出版社), pp. 33-39.
30. See Hsieh Wu-liang 謝無量, "Eastward Movement of Buddhism and Its Influence

- on Chinese Literature” 佛教東來對中國文學之影响，佛教與中國文學，pp. 15-32.
31. Thomas Graham Jackson, *Gothic Architecture in France, England, and Italy* (N.Y.: Hacker Art Books, Inc., 1975), I, p. 17.
 32. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18. For a detailed discussion of the topic, see chs. I, II, & III.
 33. An article read in a conference held in Korea in 1983.
 34. Quoted of Susan Stewart, “Some Riddles and Proverbs of Textuality” in Mailloux, p. 177.