

## *Review*

### *Chinese-Western Comparative Literature: Theory and Strategy*

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This collection of essays, stemming from the proceedings of the first East-West Comparative Literature Conference held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in August 1979, should be brought to the attention of comparatists everywhere. It also deserves the notice of more strictly literary scholars in whatever language fields who, however silently or skeptically, may have had some occasion heretofore to hear in their own subjects some of the contention surrounding this rapidly growing dimension of literary studies.

The horizons of this East-West comparative process are broad and pluralistic. The essays in this volume, however, attest to a hermeneutic motion that is largely from West to East. Of the seven papers presented, four take up the general strategy of adapting western methods of literary criticism to eastern texts, and each of the other three offers a critique of a particular poetics (including the inevitable essay reappraising Pound's ideogrammatic method). In addition, there is an afterword by John Deeney, the indefatigable editor of the volume, outlining concrete proposals for the development of Chinese-Western comparative studies, a preface by Horst Frenz, and a foreword by A. Owen Aldridge that summarizes the arguments of the conference.

Since the volume is so neatly packaged by these appendices that it tends to review itself in the process of reading, I will not summarize the essays for the reader in the manner of an "objective" review. Rather, I will point out whatever odd omissions, inconsistencies and loose ends I find, in the manner of a respondent to the conference.

And so I begin with the odd omission of genre theory from Heh-hsiang Yuan's "East-West Comparative Literature: An Inquiry into Possibilities." This fundamental lack, in what is otherwise a fairly conventional list of

long established comparative tools (style, theme, myth, period, affinity and parallel) is rather puzzling from a Chinese scholar, and it is duly noted by Aldridge in his foreword (p. xi). It seems to me that this consciousness of genre has never, not even after the May Fourth Movement and the establishment of a "new literature," been erased from the consciousness of the Chinese literary scholar to the same extent as it has been from that of his Western counterpart, an effect due largely to the Romantic revolt against normative poetics. And while it is true that China has no epic tradition like that of the West, an important book such as C. H. Wang's *The Bell and the Drum* (1974) which opens up some exciting possibilities for a comparative study of oral-formulaic traditions in the *Shih-ching* 詩經 and western oral epics (Homer), is not even mentioned, even under the rubric of style, where Yuan would probably place it. Genre as a regulating factor in a literary system is an idea which developed independently in China (as in Liu Hsieh's *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* 文心雕龍, also not mentioned), and we western scholars, who have lived through a period where genre theory was unmentionable, need this sort of Chinese sensibility more than "the magic touch of an intuitive appreciation" (p. 23), which in any case is only the starting point for literary criticism, not its goal.

Theoretical studies such as Han-liang Chang's "Towards a Structural Generic Theory of T'ang *Ch'uan-chi* 傳奇," have an important role to play in the future of East-West comparative studies, that of testing the assumptions of western models. Chang's argument moves productively towards the bringing out of the implicit generic principles of T'ang dynasty fiction in comparing it to the fantastic literature of the West, as analysed by Todorov. Yet there are some nagging loose ends in this otherwise illuminating argument. To understand how they came about, we need first to examine the nature of the structuralist inquiry. Now Todorov, being a structuralist, deals with the fantastic as an abstract synchronic theoretical genre which he clearly distinguishes from historically formed genres (Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 14), but this does not mean that he ignores diachrony entirely, a point which I will come to again in a moment. So there is some justification in Chang's claim that "instead of confronting the problem of the reader from a historical point of view, one is justified in choosing the structural point of view" (p. 49). However, Chang, in testing out Todorov's model, is not really using the procedures of synchronic structuralism *per se*

(for those procedures, see my presentation of Levi-Strauss below) which first demand the construction of a theoretical model. Chang in effect already has a model which he is going to adapt before he tests it out—a later, and more phenomenological, phase of structuralist investigation. This leads him to ignore, I think, certain crucial historical strictures that Todorov himself put on his model, strictures which are incorporated into the synchronic model as generic rules.

For Todorov, the phenomenon of fantastic literature is largely confined to the nineteenth century and the rise of a positivist scientific world view with its opposing categories of imaginary and real. The effect of this dichotomy on the Western literary system was to stimulate the production of the literature of the fantastic, which is “nothing but the bad conscience of the positivist era” (Todorov, p. 168). It is therefore the category of the real which furnishes a basis for the definition of the fantastic, and this historical category is made part of Todorov’s model in the statement that “The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person *who knows only the laws of nature* [my italics], confronting an apparently supernatural event” (Todorov, p. 25). Given these premises then, which Chang makes no attempt to modify or amend (indeed, how could he, without constructing his own model), is it not unlikely that T’ang dynasty fiction (*ch’uan-ch’i*) would manifest the fantastic hesitation that Todorov sees as the crucial precondition for the existence of this genre? Are we not in the presence of the marvelous tale as such?

Indeed this is what Chang concludes, or seems to conclude, after a meticulous description of the tale he selects for analysis, entitled *Nan-yang shih-jen* 南陽士人. He says that the hero of this tale does not hesitate about the nature of the supernatural event, his fated metamorphosis into a man-eating tiger, and that makes the hero “not unlike the one in the marvelous” (p. 47). Now there is nothing new about the marvelous—it is used by Todorov to categorize traditional tales of world literature such as *The Arabian Nights* and fairy tales where the phenomenon of the supernatural causes no particular epistemological crisis. Yet Chang tries to rescue this story for the fantastic, the genre he claims is closest to the majority of the T’ang fictional corpus. He attempts this by arguing that the story emphasizes the *character’s perception* of these metamorphoses: “the character’s perception of the supernatural is emphasized, which renders the story more fantastic

than marvelous" (p. 48).

But according to Todorov, this perception is to be ambiguous if it is to signal the presence of the fantastic, and Chang himself has ruled that very ambiguity out. Furthermore, Todorov indicates, in a passage quoted by Chang (p. 39) that this rule about the character's hesitation is *optional*. What is always required, on the other hand is the *reader's* hesitation and a special kind of reading which is neither poetic nor allegorical. Chang bases his entire case for this story's being in the fantastic on what for Todorov is only an optional rule. Surely there are some stories of the fantastic genre (and Todorov points them out in the case of Henry James) where one character thinks he has certainly seen a ghost and another character is equally convinced that that person has not, and the reader alone hesitates between the two points of view. According to Chang, however this story's third person narrator allows the reader no room to interpret the tale as anything other than the description of a series of real events.

Quite apart from these problems inherent in adapting a Western model to Eastern texts which vitiates Chang's argument, there are some loose ends. What does Chang mean, for example, in claiming that he is going to suggest for this T'ang dynasty story "a third type outside of Todorov's categories (pp. 42-43)" when later he states that "The above observations oblige us to draw the conclusion that the story is fantastic-marvelous, a transitory sub-genre *in Todorov's scheme?*" (p. 48) [my italics]. According to Todorov, this genre consists of the hesitation between the real and the imaginary and is manifested in such works as Tieck's *The Bride of the Grave* and Lewis's *The Monk*. This category of Todorov's is never discussed by Chang, although it is finally attributed to him, but the confusion is enough to convince A. Owen Aldridge to write in his foreword that Chang himself was "obliged to invent a new denominator, the fantastic-marvelous" (p. xvii).

As is the case with Professor Chou's argument which I will examine in a moment, Chang's article tends to rehearse a structuralist methodology without being entirely consistent, perhaps, as I suggested above, because of the limitations inherent in someone else's model constructed for western texts. Chang is also a bit unwary in asserting a general accommodation of structuralism to hermeneutics and that this accommodation can be represented by Todorov's approach to the fantastic (p. 32). For his part, Todorov insists that interpretation has nothing to do with structuralist

poetics (Todorov, pp. 141–144). Genre represents precisely, in his view, a structure, a configuration of literary properties, an inventory of options which furthermore do not reside on the phenomenological surface of the text. The general unearned rapprochement which Chang makes between phenomenology and structuralism, in places where he allows a historical perspective, allows him to quote from the work of Wolfgang Iser whose argument about literature is that the time-honored distinction between fiction and reality has been replaced by that of communication (*The Implied Reader, The Act of Reading*). Now Todorov does see the reader as crucially constituting the experience of the fantastic, but we must be cautious about mixing together completely different methodologies. It is precisely the distinction between real/unreal and its opposition that engendered the literature of the fantastic in the West according to Todorov (Todorov, p. 167). But then Chang says in a footnote that Todorov's reconstruction of the fantastic "is not to be confused with hermeneutics!" (p. 38).

Ying-hsiung Chou's essay, "The Linguistic and Mythical Structure of *hsing* 興 as a Combinational Model," attempts to deploy a "working model" derived from the structural linguistics of Jakobson and aimed at certain rhetorical figures in the Chinese lyrical tradition. With the notion of metaphor and metonymy as the two poles of language, he analyses *fu* 賦, *pi* 比, and *hsing*, with particular emphasis on *hsing* as a metonymical movement. Yet when Chou comes to describe the effect of this term on the reader, he lapses from the structural rigor of his analysis into the most naive phenomenology. For example, in describing the *hsing* of the ospreys in one poem from the *Shih Ching*, "Kuan Chi," he employs the notions of the poet's lived world (*Lebenswelt*) and the created world of the poem to substantiate his views on the mythical movement of consciousness this linguistic device effects . . . . "hsing plays the role of a mediating factor, existing between our lived reality and the imaginary world of poetry" (p. 67).

There is a confusion in Chou's argument about just what kind of mythical mediation he wants us to see as operative in the figure of *hsing*. One wishes he had kept to a more clearly structural analysis. Indeed, Levi-Strauss's structural analyses of the mythical mind, and in particular his analysis of bird naming as a metonymical operation and the metaphorical relation which is imagined between the society of birds and the society of men is directly relevant to Chou's discussion (Claude Levi-Strauss, *The*

*Savage Mind*, pp. 203–209). Although he attributes the source of his word “mythical” to Levi-Strauss, Chou does not seem to be aware of this discussion.

In short, there is no need of a phenomenological supplement to Chou’s presentation. I am puzzled as to why he introduces it to explain the mythical thought involved in *hsing*; I think he is only confusing the reader when he says that *hsing* “appears *on the surface* [my italics] as a metonymical device,” yet “through careful cultural-mythical readings, one finds *beneath the surface* [my italics] linguistic phenomena the metaphoric relationships which place the natural world and the human world on top of each other” (p. 76), for it is precisely the lack of a careful cultural-mythical reading that we feel in his argument. For Jakobson and Levi-Strauss, the operations of metaphor and metonymy are both on the same level, the level of structure. Furthermore, it goes against the very idea of system to derive the laws of that system from something (a *Lebenswelt*, for example) lying outside it. Chou’s attraction to phenomenological description of surface phenomena therefore leads him to posit that the reason why poets put so much weight on the behavior of birds is due to “seasonal changes which play a very important role in people’s daily life” (p. 74), a ludicrous assertion, especially when one considers the radical break that all structural thinking makes with appearances.

Both Chou and Chang, as ostensibly structuralist thinkers, have not thought through, it seems, the radical epistemological break that structuralism claims to make with phenomenology. It might be well to examine that break where it occurs in the writing of the founding father of French structuralism, Levi-Strauss, before going on to Donald Wesling’s article on Derrida, for Derrida is also centrally concerned with the two modes of investigation. In his autobiographical *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), Levi-Strauss expressed his conviction, gained from his reading of Marx, Freud, and his study of geology, that intellectual understanding consists in the reduction of one type of reality to another and that true reality is never the most obvious, surface reality. The object of structuralist social science, he writes, is to construct a model, examine its properties and the way it reacts to laboratory tests, and then apply our observations to the interpretation of empirical happenings. He writes:

And so I stood out against the new tendencies in metaphysical thinking which were beginning to take shape. Phenomenology I found unacceptable, in so far as it postulated a continuity between experience and reality. That the one enveloped and explained the other I was quite willing to agree, but I had learnt from my three mistresses that there is no continuity in the passage between the two and that to reach reality we must first repudiate experience, even though we may later reintegrate it in an objective synthesis in which sentimentality plays no part. (pp. 61-62)

Now Derrida says that this break does not take us outside of what he calls the logocentrism of the West. For Derrida, modern structuralism has grown and developed within a more or less direct and avowed dependence upon phenomenology which is for him a kind of traditional philosophizing that leads from Husserl directly back to Plato (where essence and appearance are in opposition). Western logocentrism as analysed by Derrida, and in particular the concept of Chinese writing that functions as a sort of "European hallucination" or "hieroglyphist prejudice" in the linguistic and ethnographic treatises of the West, is the subject of Donald Wesling's essay "Methodological Implication of the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida for Comparative Literature: The Opposition East-West and Several Other Oppositions." What Wesling does, in effect, is accuse Derrida of being ethnocentric in confining logocentrism to the West, for the eastern tradition is subject to the same myths of origin and presence in his view. Wesling's is a clever argument, and one that I cannot possibly unravel here, except perhaps to suggest that Wesling's Derrida is a bit of a straw man.

In his *Of Grammatology* Derrida is indeed concerned to deconstruct certain ethnocentric notions of language prominent in western linguistic theories, but this emphasis does not necessarily mean that Derrida's thought is ethnocentric, since the entire force of Derrida's argument is directed at the very idea of a center as anything other than a necessary fiction. Nevertheless, we should probably grant Wesling's point that Derrida manifests a kind of ethnocentrism in his *Of Grammatology*, even if that ethnocentrism is only the shadow of his real argument. What we should not warrant, however, is his assertion that this so-called ethnocentrism results from Derrida's fascination with the spatialized vision of a graphic poetics:

The fascination with the physical fact of writing, especially with writing in the form of the Chinese ideogram or the graphic poetics of Mallarme's "Un coup de dés," suggests that Derrida's is essentially a spatializing intelligence of the sort which, in the twentieth century, has always accompanied an aversion to historical modes of thought. (p. 100)

Now, it is certainly true that Derrida does not conceive of history in any ordinary sense, but this does not mean that Derrida is unconcerned with literary history, as his essay on structuralism, "Force and Signification" in his *Writing And Difference* clearly demonstrates. Here Derrida treats structuralism as a historical mode of thought by examining the critical works of some of the later members of the Geneva school, particularly Rousset and Richard. Derrida stresses here structuralism's inability to conceptualize intensity or force. In his view structuralism is constantly menaced by the possibility of concealing meaning through the very act of uncovering it. And this is so, Derrida asserts, because structuralism aims at a totalized atemporal vision where meaning is simultaneously present:

Thus, Rousset invokes the difficulty of gaining access to the simultaneity which is truth within reading, and Richard the difficulty of accounting for it within writing. In both cases simultaneity is the myth of a total reading or description, promoted to the status of a regulatory ideal. The search for the simultaneous explains the capacity to be fascinated by the spatial image. . . . (*Writing and Difference*, p. 24)

As this entire essay shows, Derrida offers us insights into the spatializing tendencies of other literary critics, but he can hardly be said to be "fascinated" himself, since he is concerned to deconstruct this rhetoric of spatiality by a logic of temporality and difference. In confining himself largely to the discussion in *Of Grammatology*, Wesling has given us a version of Derrida as the willful opponent of common sense (but what science, even a grammatological one, was ever founded on common sense, which tells us the earth is flat, the stars are close at hand, and matter is solid?). It seems unlikely that he has understood the full implications, for both East and West, of Derrida's assertion, expressed in *Of Grammatology*, that "the fascination that the Chinese ideogram exercised on Pound's writing may thus be given all its historical significance" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 92), in his proposed

science of grammatology.

Since I have no particular expertise in either Marxist criticism or Ezra Pound, I will of necessity have to give the next two articles rather short shrift. Douwe Fokkema's essay "Strength and Weakness of the Marxist Theory of Literature with Reference to Marxist Criticism in the People's Republic of China" is mainly about the weaknesses of Marxism and demonstrates little more than the fact that paradigms tend to talk past each other. Fokkema's assessment comes from the point of view of scientific or critical rationalism, that is, the logic of falsifiability put forth by Karl Popper as the mechanism of scientific truth and discovery. Fokkema therefore abstracts what he takes to be the eight major theses of Marxist literary theory and then shows that there are contradictions and anomalies among them. All this is well and good if we believe in the possibility of objective grounds for a rational choice between conflicting theories of literature. Then we can all presumably make up our own minds, as "scholars in a democratic society," about the validity of Marxist claims that literature is a reflection of determining economic factors which come in the last instance of analysis. But the possibility of this kind of choice has been called into question by Popper's own students and other historians and philosophers of science. In particular, both Feyerabend (*Against Method*) and Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) have pointed out that the history of science is characterized by meaning-change as well as inconsistency (or "falsification"), and have raised the possibility that the conceptual structures of two competing theories might be so radically different that they shared no statements in common, so they were literally "incommensurable." Such is the case, I think, with the Marxist claim to a science of history and the interpretation of literature justified by that claim. I for one am not sure that the Marxists are even talking about the same theoretical object (literature) that other theorists are talking about even within the Marxist camp itself. Some Marxist critics, notably Althusser who was influenced by the thought of Mao in constructing his version of dialectics, assert that the last instance of economic analysis never actually comes when we consider the determination of superstructural phenomena (i.e. literature). Fokkema's critical rationalism does not enable us to decide because it fails to mention this dimension of incommensurability; or show us a possible way out of the impasse it represents.

William Tay's essay, "Fragmentary Negation: A Reappraisal of Ezra

Pound's Ideogrammic Method," breaks no new ground in telling us that Pound's poetics, particularly in the *Cantos*, left him with a colossal failure, since Pound himself admitted in the *Drafts and Fragments* that he could not make his poem cohere, thereby implying that the expected paradiso section which would make everything that went before it luminously clear was not forthcoming. But by peculiarly oafish legerdemain common among scholars of Pound, failure is success because that very failure brought about "the crystalization of the artist's dilemma in the modern world" (p. 151). In particular, Pound's negative dialectics of fragmentation is positive because it was an attempt to negate the inert consumption habits of that paste-board antagonist, the typical bourgeois philistine reader. But what the reader of Pound mostly discovers through all this "cognitive" dissonance is a bundle of Fascist economic assertions or some Confucian moral platitude, facts which Tay does not discuss. It may also be true that Pound, in translating Chinese poetry, enabled Western readers to more easily consume *chinoiserie* or a certain mirage of Chinese culture, at the very same time that he was opening up new possibilities for poetry in the West. Also, Tay does not mention Donald Davie's book on Pound, which shows the connection of Pound's poetics with the novel. Davie argues convincingly that Pound perilously assumed that the intellectual structures of the novel leading the reader to discovery about the society around him, and to formulate his own criticism of that society, could be simulated by the ideogram. The idea of an inert bourgeois reader is, of course, a falsehood (witness Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader*) and one that Pound probably needed to shore up the sagging status of poetry in the early years of this century.

The final essay in this volume, "*Andersstreben*: Conception of Media and Intermedia" by Wai-lim Yip, is an interesting comparison of this concept in western and eastern aesthetic theories. Yip's argument is that modern poetry aspires to a condition of music, and that this aspiration in the West has given rise to an obsession of the making of a defamiliarized art language to accomplish that purpose. In the East, on the other hand, although poetry here also aspires to musical worlds beyond words, the Chinese poet sees language as a means to approximate and disclose Nature: "There is no need of distortion and defamiliarization. For the Chinese poet and artist, the priority is given to things in Nature, and his foremost job is to capture them

as they are" (p. 178). All this seems true enough, if a bit simplistic, but I wonder if Chinese poetry and aesthetic theory are entirely free of calling attention to themselves as works of art with artificial devices. I am no sinologist, but it seems to me that Huang T'ing-chien's poetry, especially the "Painted Fan" poems, reconstruct the expressions used by previous writers in a way that is entirely consonant with the theories of Russian Formalists. The style of these poems seems quite defamiliarizing in intent, even if they do describe the vision of a landscape on a painted fan.

In concluding this review I would like to mention on the practical side of things that the Comparative Literature Division of The Chinese University of Hong Kong is trying to complete within the next two years (1) a glossary of Chinese literary terms (2) a reference book of Chinese literary-critical terms and, most important in my opinion (3) a Companion to Comparative Literature: Chinese-Western Literary Relations. Some such guide books are sorely needed by students of comparative literature, for until we have them the literary sensibility that is indigenous to China will remain a blind spot for most Western literary theorists.

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