

## Review

*China and the West: Comparative Literature Studies*

Ed. William Tay, Chou Ying-hsiung, Yuan Heh-hsiang. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1980. Pp. xiii + 313.

This collection of essays originally appeared as a Special Issue of the *New Asia Academic Bulletin* in 1979. It was subsequently reissued in book form with an introduction by A. Owen Aldridge. A revised edition in which some essays were replaced came out in Chinese under the title *Chung-hsi pi-chiao wen-hsueh lun-chi* 中西比較文學論集 (Taipei: Shih-pao wen-hua, 1980). My remarks will be confined to the English version, *China and the West*.

The essays in this volume fall broadly into two categories whose methodology is that of the Western Heritage: traditional or "consensus" comparative literature studies (genre, theme, style, period, movement, etc.) and those which embrace one or more of the contemporary approaches to literature (phenomenology, structuralism) as a point of comparison. Of course, my distinction is somewhat artificial since there are phenomenological studies of style and theme and structuralist studies of genre and literary system, (though not in this volume) but nevertheless the distinction is useful in that every act of criticism deploys consciously or unconsciously a theory of literature, though some are more "theoretical" than others. The difference is one of degree and not of kind. But since each of these twenty essays is neatly summarized by Aldridge's introduction, and compared with others as to its conclusions and intentions, my task will be somewhat narrower in focus. I would like to select a few representative essays from both categories and analyse the problems symptomatically inherent in them of applying western methodologies to Chinese literature. As Aldridge points out, the

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essays are "designed for the most part to relate Chinese literature to its western counterpart, by the use of modern theoretical techniques" (p. iii). He goes on to point out that western criticism is not monolithic and that it cannot be indiscriminately applied to Chinese works of art. It is the conceptual space between these two statements by Aldridge which interests me, that area of blindness and insight which arises from the attempt to relate East to West through western methodologies.

Now that post-structuralism has arrived on the scene, it would seem that critics have become more aware of the paradoxical fact that as much is obscured in the act of criticism as is revealed. Indeed, the relationship between theoretical "error" (in that no one theory is ever acceptable) and critical "truth" (in that the individual truths occasionally appearing in criticism are usually embedded in theoretical discourse) has moved into the forefront of contemporary criticism in the West and can be found in the works of such diverse critics as Paul de Man and Murray Krieger (for an analysis of this phenomenon, see Wallace Martin "Critical Truth as Necessary Error" in *What is Criticism?* ed. Paul Hernadi). Both Krieger and de Man view theory as an inescapable part of criticism, but also, for reasons just mentioned, as a necessary evil. This paradox can result from several areas locatable in a critic's work: that between the critic's persona, his need to generalize, and his actual person (Krieger) or when a critic's actual findings and statements about literature surpass the limits of his initial methodology without his knowing it or in any way being able to control it (de Man). In any case, despite the differences in their assumptions about the nature of literature as a humanistic endeavor, as Martin points out, both Krieger and de Man argue that critical theory is present so that truth can be discovered elsewhere. The fact that China as the site of this elsewhere of critical truth appears increasingly in the work of post-structuralist thinkers themselves (especially Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* and Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*) is a fact whose ramifications for East-West comparative literature we cannot explore here, but it is interesting to note the receptivity to an "outside" of Western thought among these thinkers. Phenomenology and structuralism, as methodologies, do not seem to have manifested this interest as part of their thought (one notable exception might be Heidegger), despite their claims to universality.

But be that as it may, all I can hope to accomplish in this review is to get a fix on certain disturbances in the critical discourse of these essays where

I feel that insights of the original Chinese texts are being obscured. The simplest and most visible case of this occurs in Ling Chung's "The Reception of Cold Mountain's Poetry in the Far East and the United States," and involves not a conflict between the critic's person and persona, but the actual use of the term persona itself as applied to the Han Shan 寒山子 poems. When Ling Chung tries to account for the reception of these poems among the Beat generation writers such as Kerouac and Snyder, she brings forth some interesting reasons: their extraordinary ability to evoke subjective and spiritual states of mind that exist outside the pressures of modern industrial and commercial civilization. Furthermore this poet had an added appeal to the Beats because Han Shan is not an alienated poet ". . . the symbol Cold Mountain does not suggest an alienated self. On the contrary, it signifies the reconciliation between the self and its environment, and between alter-ego and ego. This symbol crystalizes the personal salvation of the persona" (p. 95). Now, I know that Ling Chung is drawn to this term because she does not believe, as a scholar, that the Han Shan poems are the product of one poet, but of at least two different poets writing in different centuries. One must account for the reception of these poems in terms of a coherent literary personality. Yet it is legitimate to ask what Beat poet ever read these poems who was concerned with the salvation of a *persona*, a term in its root meaning designating a (social) mask. In fact the Beats were, as a literary movement in America, reacting against what they took to be the sterile and academic use of poetry and tradition in the universities. The term persona, which comes to us from the literary criticism and culture criticism of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, was also employed by the New Critics, and was a favored analytical concept during the 1950's. As far as the Beats were concerned, one could hardly find a more alienating term, for it tends to deny the poet's ability to speak in his own voice. And what is more, what they saw in these Chinese poems is obscured by Ling Chung's own analyses of the originals, as when she says that "In the following poem, the persona presents the mountain in a spell-binding vision" (p. 94), or when she says that nature, or more precisely Cold Mountain, is "absorbed or internalized into the mind of the persona" (p. 95) of these poems. This is an example, I think, of gross critical insensitivity produced by the fact that western critical terms tend to drag along with them assumptions about the nature of literature, assumptions which here do not apply to the western or Chinese context.

On the other hand, the terminological problems in Wai-lim Yip's

essay, "The Taoist Aesthetic: *Wu-yen tu-hua*, the Unspeaking, Self-generating, Self-conditioning, Self-transforming, Self-complete Nature," arise not from insensitivity, but from the problems themselves inherent in theorizing a Taoist aesthetic. The difficulties appear in such nearly parodic critical coinages as "non-mediating mediation" (p. 32) and "decreative-creative dialectic" (p. 24), self-cancelling and contorted terms which mimic the play of Taoist discourse itself. But unlike Ling Chung, Yip is aware of the historical weight of certain critical terms and, despite the attractions of phenomenology to his thought (he draws parallels with Heidegger's concept of *physis* in enabling the reader to understand the Taoist concept of nature) he does not try to tell us that Taoist poetry is another version of the unmediated vision. He speaks, for example, of the ideal Taoist poet who, when pushed to the logical end, should be silent and seek no expression, for "the affirmation of the nonverbal world cancels out such a possibility" (p. 29). Yip, in recognizing this paradox, is nevertheless drawn to formulate the Taoist project as one which seeks to eliminate those aspects of language which are obtrusive to the attainment of the cosmic measure of things. In short, Yip's way out is to suggest a second naturalness, in which the poet treats words as natural objects. In the Taoist aesthetic, the conflict of Art and Nature is attenuated so that "The Taoist consciousness, dispossessing to possess, decreating to create, has helped to eliminate these (cultural) elements so that poetic language is conditioned to a closest possible degree of approximation of Nature as it is" (p. 31). Yet one may doubt that this project is unique to Taoism. Indeed, it may be the project inherent in all poetry, as Jean-Paul Sartre suggests in his *What is Literature?* Sartre argues that the poet tries to set himself up outside of language, that he considers words to be a trap in which to catch a fleeting reality; his consciousness is not in the midst of things with other men. In general, in the poetic attitude, consciousness believes that words are in a wild state, that "they are natural things which sprout naturally upon the earth like grass and trees" (Sartre, *What is Literature?* p. 5).

The trouble with Yip's formulation of a Taoist aesthetic is, however, that we know that he knows that Taoist language does not originate like a natural object. Yet his sympathy with the Taoist vision is such that he wants us to believe it is so. We can see this conflict quite openly in Yip's treatment of metaphor. According to Yip, the Taoist aesthetic by definition precludes the demands for categorization and commentary demanded by

Western thought, and that “the affirmation of things as they are precludes any necessity of metaphor and metaphysics which have played a central role in much of western poetry” (p. 23). It must be said in all fairness that some of the poems Yip cites as Taoist-inspired seem quite convincing on this point. The problems come, however, when Taoist texts themselves appear as metaphorical in Yip’s own critical discourse. As a Western critic, Yip seems unwittingly committed to the view that criticism is discourse that presents itself as literal, about another kind of discourse (poetry, for example) which it treats as metaphorical. To disclose the meaning of the text, to give a recent formulation of this view, is to interpret it from the perspective of an official code granting itself the privilege of literalness (See Michael McCandles “Criticism is the (Dis) closure of Meaning” in *What is Criticism?*). Thus we have the spectacle of Yip asserting that Taoist discourse approximates the literal simple and unhewn while his own critical statement tends to confirm the opposite, as when he transcodes the Taoist uncarved block (素樸) as follows:

It is clear that for Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, *Simple and Unhewn* (su p’u) is that realm of our original total consciousness which is open and unblocked to the free flow of things and which is lost to most people through their acquisition of knowledge, one of the many forms of systematizations imposed upon our original nature. p. 21)

There are many other examples of this philosophic (i.e., Western and metaphysical) treatment and translation of metaphor into literal statement in Yip’s essay, but in general the effect on the reader is the same: one wonders whether western assumptions about the nature of literature have not again gotten in the way of Chinese insight. The problem of language and silence in relation to the Tao tends to be obscured and overlaid here by a new opposition, that of literal and metaphorical, a problem belonging to western discourse.

By far the most theoretically sophisticated presentation in the volume is Ying-hsiung Chou’s “‘Lord, Do Not Cross the River’: Literature as a Mediating Process.” It is a rigorous structuralist analysis of an ancient oral ballad 公無渡河, which survives embedded in three different prose texts each of which gives us different versions of the genesis of this song. We know, however, from the very first pages where Chou’s sympathies lie — not with structuralism as an ideology but with upgrading the humanistic value of

works with folk connections, as opposed to the "elitist poem" (p. 110). For example, in talking about the value (in terms of class consciousness) of the Fu on Shang-lin Park 上林賦 as an embodiment of the attitudes of the uppermost layer of Han society, and the value of a simple *yüeh-fu* 樂府 ballad of the period 擁離. Chou tells us that the folk artist "sings from the core of his heart, his practical concern" (p. 110). Or later, that in this simple poem, "the heart of the issue is unfolded and the singer makes a blunt comment on the ruler's unnecessary expansion of the imperial residences" (p. 110). The singer's rhetorical plea to relocate the park offers, according to Chou, a temporary solution to the conflict between ruler and subjects. On the whole, these pages are quite consistent, indeed often brilliant in their application of structuralism, for there is no doubt where Chou's sentiment as a critic lies. The problem is, though, that structuralism is not an evaluative discipline; indeed, it purports to be a science, and we soon see developing in the body of this essay a conflict, disguised with some difficulty, between Chou's structuralist persona and its claims for "objectivity" and his obviously Marxist sympathies.

This disparity is marked early in the essay by a shift in models from the genetic structuralism of Lucien Goldmann's classes in conflict and literature as the expression of social groups to the "purer" structuralism of Levi-Strauss himself. A rote review of the vulgar Marxist Ernst Fischer's dialectics of nature does little to serve as an effective transition between these two thinkers. It soon appears that the conflict which literature mediates is not that between classes in a complex social totality as we had earlier been led to believe, but that of "forces in nature" (p. 111). We are told that in its earliest stages poetry served the purpose of "bridging the gap between man and nature" (p. 111). The mediating processes and powers of literature are now called upon to reconcile a new set of oppositions which have little, if any, relationship to a class struggle. It is true that every culture appropriates nature in its own way depending on the means and relations of production, but nature here is not seen as any Marxist ever saw it. Rather, it is analysed as a structural linguist might see it. Not human society, but life itself is polarized: "In its *primordial state* (my italics), life is literally made up of sets of oppositions: life/death, love/hate, man/nature, culture/nature, art/nature and so on" (p. 111). The mythical thought of Levi-Strauss is then called upon by Chou to explain the necessity for literary mediation. Instead of the dialectical logic of progressive class conflict, we are given the failed

mediations of mythic thought, which in Levi-Strauss can ultimately never overcome initial contradictories.

It is at this point that the reader takes leave of Chou's theoretical commitment to structuralism as being manifestly in error, for we can see that it obscures not only the genesis of this very simple folk poem born from ritual lamentation but also the critic's own sympathies in his quest for "objectivity." In the first place, Chou's own analysis belies the western assumption of fact that we must somehow begin with "binary oppositions" in analysing the poem. For Chou (and for the original context of composition) there is obviously something lying outside of this model, something undifferentiated of which structuralism cannot speak, the experience of madness perhaps, which leads the 狂夫, the deranged man to merge himself with the river in the first place. Chou explicitly recognizes the fear of this undifferentiated state when he discusses the repetition of the word 河, river, in the poem as an example of Freudian anxiety mastering. Chou's basic critical impulse is not at all structuralist, but rather empirical, concerned with daily life. It is not structuralism which leads him to list an entire page of line variants for this poem, to be sure. For they do not enter into his analysis. Granted, there is a paucity of information about the dynamic relationships between different classes during the period in which the song was composed, but what leads Chou to give us the following information unless it is an insight that something uncanny lying outside of rational analysis is at the origins of this poem:

Korea, presumably the locale of the song, was in other words not annexed before this time and remained a relatively peripheral area in Chinese civilization during the second century B.C. As such, the milieu of the song is probably seen as a rather uncultured state. In the minds of the singers, it is quite probable that the river poses as threat to their lives.

As a matter of fact the river is so menacing that it appears as a lexical or a phonetic item in each and every line of the ballad made up of four four-character lines. (p. 119)

So all the singers of each version are able to feel a sense of menace which somehow slips through a structuralist analysis, a menace which has to be mastered by symbolization, but which is by no means posterior to it.

Secondly, what we seem to have in the story of the genesis of this poem is not *in the primordial state* a series of oppositions and mediations à la

Levi-Strauss, but the fearsome experience of the undifferentiated, a de-structuration of social units and the self, and a genesis of a new structure out of the ritual song. Chou is able to detail the variations of the song quite well once they have entered the social matrix (what the linguistic model of structuralism was designed to explicate in the first place), but he misses entirely the mimetic cycle of which the song is only the middle point. And lastly, we can see that Chou's structuralist critical persona leads him to make remarks that are so obviously at variance with his empirical feelings that they unintentionally provoke a smile. His justifiably worthy project of making items of folk origin seem important and complicated "literature" because they deal with fundamental human issues therefore falls a bit flat, as when he says that the situation of this poem in one of its embeddings develops into "a full-fledged human drama, represented in cubic form" (p. 115). In my opinion, as long as we continue to use western models which disparage ritual action as retrograde and meaningless (this includes Marxism and structuralism; c.f. René Girard "Differentiation and Undifferentiation in Levi-Strauss and Recent Critical Theory," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 404-429), we will continue to obscure what can be known about the Chinese view of how culture emerges from chaos and the real value of literature, folk or elitist, in revealing the nature of that emergence.

Nevertheless, it is apposite here to ponder Levi-Strauss's own reservations, strongly affirmed, about applying a structuralist approach to literary works:

The fundamental vice of any literary criticism with structuralist pretensions comes from it amounting too often to a play of mirrors, wherein it becomes impossible to distinguish the object from its symbolic reverberation in the consciousness of the subject. The work studied and the analyser's thoughts reflect themselves in each other, and we are denied any means of discerning what is simply received from the former and what the latter puts there. One is thus trapped in a reciprocal relativism which can afford subjectively certain charms; but we do not see what type of external evidence it could be referred to.

..... one never knows during the pseudo-dialogue between the critic and the work, if the former is a faithful observer, or the unconscious animator of a production whose spectacle he is providing for himself, and whose audience will always be wondering if the text is emitted by flesh and blood characters or if it is bestowed on puppets which the critic himself has invented through a ventriloquial skilfulness. (quoted in James A.

Though it is ultimately saved by a strong empirical impulse, Chou's analysis, for all its charms, narrowly avoids falling into the traps Levi-Strauss mentions.

I have chosen these three essays because they seem to exemplify the range and limitations of much else that goes on in the volume. For example, Andrew H. Plaks's otherwise excellent study of the generic sources of the Chinese novel, "Full-length *Hsiao-shuo* and the Western Novel: A Generic Reappraisal," is marred by the exclusion of the history and development of the novel in Russia where it did not depend on a thriving middle class. Or does Plaks consider the Russian novel to be a non-European development? One wonders about this because it is well known that Lukacs's *Theory of the Novel*, from which Plaks derives much of his argument that the novel is an ironic form, was intended to be an introductory essay to a study of Dostoyevsky, and indeed ends with a discussion of his and Tolstoy's novels. However, it should be pointed out that there are several essays in the volume which strictly speaking are not acts of criticism but which are instead programmatic statements of theory (Lefevere, common poetics; Fokkema, literary system) without application. We shall simply have to wait and see whether or not these theories can be applied as unproblematically as these theorists assume. In any case, the field of East-West comparative literature offers the western critic exciting opportunities as well as perils as pitfalls. After all, insight is the other side of blindness, and there is much insight to be gleaned in these pages also.

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