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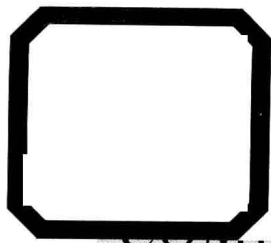
## 比较文学：东方与西方

Department of Comparative Literature  
Institute of Comparative Literature  
Sichuan University, China



四川大学出版社  
Sichuan University Press

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# What is Good Chinese? Towards the Problem of Literature in the Chinese Commonwealth

*Kubin, Wolfgang*  
*Bonn University*

**中文摘要：**本文指出，高、低文化界限的消失并不一定是好现象。当代华语界缺乏对文学优劣的判断标准，网络文学的泛滥造成“文学”某种程度的贬值。好的文学绝不是急就章。真正的文学关涉风格的写作，是作家在遣词造句上的独具匠心之作。因此完全采用通俗的语言进行创作将丧失文学的风格性。仅以内容取胜或沦为政治工具的作品，都不是真正的“文学”，难有持久的生命力。大陆推行“普通话”带来写作语言的地位的高低之分，白话文运动走极端造成消遣性大众文学与“少数派”边缘文学的分立，而后者或许将更经得起时间的检验。要重视华语作家的外语作品，这涉及作家内在的张力。在华语文学研究领域，学界对大陆作家研究的比重较大，但也应充分重视大陆之外的华语作家。

A question that the poet Ouyang Jianghe (b. 1956) in Peking raised some years ago is still intriguing me. He once asked “What is good Chinese?” He did not answer this question, but he seemed to have kept a problem in his mind then that is not easy to deal with, because this problem has not only aesthetic implications, but it also touches upon questions of morality and democracy.

## **I . What is (good) literature ?**

For someone like me who believes in norms and judges literary works according to his norms, the Chinese Commonwealth, wherever it might be, gives me the impression that it has lost its clear standard for the assessment of good or bad literature. Or to put it less in terms of morals, it seems to lack an aesthetic criterion



for something that qualifies effective language and specifies literature, so that the high expectations of a demanding readership can be satisfied both at home and abroad.

Our approach, however, may have to occasionally reach beyond the Chinese perspective: because in a country like Germany, which after 1968 came under the sway of American pop culture and Chinese revolution, the belief in high literature and art was destroyed and replaced by the conviction that “everyone is an artist” (Joseph Beuys), and that anyone can produce outstanding pieces of literature. I have always been very critical of this idea, quite common among academics who have ceased to discriminate between Shakespeare and *The Sun*. I want to bring in three arguments for my position. Firstly, analogous to an athletic discipline, achievement in every kind of art requires exercise, training and drill. Secondly, the post modern world we live in has become a world of, and for, specialists. There is no need for everyone to understand physics, mathematics, and literature. Only a few can produce and enjoy them. My last point, however, may be of more importance. When talking about literature, even literary scholars rarely define what they call literature.<sup>[1]</sup> It still seems to be self-evident that everyone’s concept in this respect is the same. But this is never the case.

In March 2011, the Peking-based *China Daily* published two very informative articles about so-called web literature.<sup>[2]</sup> They mention for 2010, 1.46 million registered writers who published 4.1 million volumes of fiction, and they introduce a representative author who writes 6000 words a day. What one gains from these articles is the impression that anything that is published on the web is literature, as long as it is written for a certain readership. If this is true, then the literary scene hardly differs from the sports scene: literature written by everyone for anyone is like playing soccer on the streets—whoever wants can join the match, and whoever is satisfied with a sports event not up to international standard may watch.

Who among well known writers is able or even willing to produce 6000 words a day? Thomas Mann (1875-1955)<sup>[3]</sup> spoke of one page he would write every day; the novelist Peter Schneider (b. 1940) writes only 100 pages a year; Zhai Yongming (b. 1955) finishes one poem per month, and Ouyang Jianghe might pause for two years to gain new aesthetic insights. “Gut Ding will Weile haben”, as we say in German, Rome wasn’t built in a day, as one says in English. This means: good literature needs time. Take for instance, the breathtaking prose of the Hungarian narrative writer László Krasznahorkai (b. 1954). He prefers long sentences, whose powerful

rhythm might cost him hours.<sup>[4]</sup> I cannot think of any living Chinese novelist who would be able to compete with him.

And all those who boast about writing one-day-novels, i.e. finishing and publishing a novel within 24 hours, should actually earn our reasonable doubt.<sup>[5]</sup> It is not only the procedure of writing, but additionally, or even more so, the procedure of revising a manuscript, that after many hours allows a writer to say: "This page is well done."

Can there really be more than one million good novelists on the Chinese web? The scene reminds me of mass running in German cities, where every year tens of thousands of common people run for fun, including myself. But I would never claim that after finishing a half marathon I should be recognized as a runner who could take part in the Olympics.

I do not mind if someone needs writing as therapy or to make money, and I do not mind either if someone likes to browse through certain lowbrow books instead of reading highbrow literature line by line, word for word. Literature can be entertainment and is sometimes even treated so by organizers of literature festivals. Take, for instance, Cologne's festival called "lit. Cologne". It is by now regarded as the biggest literary event in Germany. In terms of quantity this is even true. In 2003 the organizers invited a French woman, who claimed to have slept with one hundred men, and made a book out of her experiences. What qualified her for her public reading? Probably it was only the content of her book, not her eloquence. But I would not call this (high) literature; I would rather call this functional or commercial literature. This is a kind of literature which puts emphasis upon stories and not upon style. Its immediate success is guaranteed. It is only in the long run that so-called highbrow literature will be the winner and lowbrow authors will be forgotten. In this respect I do not see any future for writers like Hong Ying (1962) or Ha Jin (1956),<sup>[6]</sup> whose books sell very well on the German book market, but whose Chinese stories are already outdated.

So how do I define the word "literature"? Writing should be a life long activity. So if Chen Ruoxi (Lucy Chen, b. 1938) who stops writing in 2000, two years after the publication of her autobiography (2008), declares, "Writing belongs to my past. Now I'm more concerned with living,"<sup>[7]</sup> then she is not a real writer any more. I can understand that someone has to face a crisis of writing just as Günter Grass (b. 1927), now at the age of 83, but he continues to produce art—he has switched to drawing. How come Chen Ruoxi sees a difference between writing and living? Isn't

writing living, and in this sense, living is writing? I cannot imagine any serious writer without writing every day, or at least dealing with the issue of literature and art in an active way.

Moreover, good literature is a matter of style and of conscious production. One has to develop a unique style so that one is recognizable by one's language. Without being told whose work this or that book is, as long as you are familiar with the style of a certain author, you will be able to tell in a blind way this was done by the poet Yang Lian (b. 1955), living in London, or by the poet Durs Grünbein (b. 1962), living in Berlin.

## **II. What is good language?**

Our question seems to be a simple one, but as it touches upon morals and politics, it often leads to dispute and misunderstanding. Obvious is the permanent quarrel about theory and practice of language between the mainland and Taiwan. Both sides of the Taiwan Strait lay claim to correct Chinese. Both sides might even despise each other for reasons that go back to the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement (1919) and its search for a new language. Even the excellent Hanyu Pinyin transcription system, which “Peking” invented some fifty years ago and which is in world wide use, even internationally accepted (since 1971), is still sometimes rejected by purists on Taiwan and in the USA. I do not want to go too much into politics here, but rather grasp the opportunity to discuss our problem from a broader perspective. The reason for avoiding the political issue is quite clear: we shall never come to terms with language and ideology.

Take for example the Hong Kong poet Leung Ping-kwan (Liang Bingjun, b. 1949), whom I translated in book form and extensively introduced to a German audience. Do I translate his “loose” Chinese? No, I translate his brilliant ideas, as his Chinese is not the Mandarin which I learnt in Peking. He is of course quite right when he complains to me, I should not judge his oeuvre from the centre, from the capital, but I should see his Cantonese influenced “common language” (baihua) from the edge, from Hong Kong. To assess Chinese according to “Peking” is quite common now and leads to many forms of discontentment. Bei Dao, who was raised in Peking for instance, thinks that the Chinese grammar of the Malaysian-born writer in Chinese, Chantelle Tiong (Zhang Yiping, b. 1971), is anything but clear; whereas Ouyang Jianghe, who was raised in Sichuan, finds her “traditional” Chinese very special. Let me end this with a short reference to German speaking

countries. The German which is spoken and written in cities like Berlin, Vienna, and Zurich can be very different, but no German writer would claim to be better in German than a colleague in Austria or Switzerland. The differences are the most appealing.

What do I mean by a broader perspective, from where we have to approach the problem of good Chinese? Mass culture and mass literature are not solely socialist phenomena. We find this tendency in democratic societies, too. Take, for instance, the German experience. In 1968 the American literary critic Leslie Fiedler (1917-2003) demanded in his famous speech at Freiburg University: "Cross the Border—Close the Gap." This meant the end of modern literature in Germany, which was then still dominated by French modernity, and in this sense elitist. German writers turned to America as the new model, and tried to overcome the gap between highbrow and lowbrow literature. From then on, the common language of the people, the language spoken on the streets and in factories, replaced the somewhat aristocratic German and the sophisticated world outlook of modern writers. Literary works were to be read and understood by everyone. Though literature did not die in the very end, as the eminent intellectual Hans Magnus Enzensberger (b. 1929) predicted, the literary productions of West Germany right into the 1980s often showed a loss of style and standard from which it recovered only after reunion with East Germany. The rescue of German literature through the help of East German writers might come as a surprise, but contrary to Mainland China (and contrary to West German intellectuals who were under the impact of the Cultural Revolution), the former GDR did not destroy classical tradition. That is why the best German poets after 1989 are more or less those who were born and raised under socialism.

The return of classical German tradition to the literary scene meant the downfall of all those writers who made use of a common language that everyone could easily comprehend. Despite the fact that he won the Nobel Prize for literature, and despite the fact that he is still world-famous and influential in countries like China, Heinrich Böll (1917-1985) is no longer considered as a great writer in Germany. One can even hear voices which go so far as to say that the only readable work he wrote is the collection of letters sent home during the war. At that time, however, he was not yet a writer at all. Something similar is true for the Viennese poet Erich Fried (1921-1988). Of his 10,000 plain poems, only the love poems and not the political poems might have survived him. His thoughts are too simple; his language

is too superficial.

For Böll and Fried, language was more or less a tool of their political convictions. It was not treated as art, as something that has an aesthetic right of its own. The same can be said of many Chinese writers who achieve fame only for the content of a book, but as soon as said content ceases to cause a sensation, they are forgotten. I could drop a lot of names here, but I keep them to myself, as the (Chinese) audience might feel uncomfortable.

I do not mean that critics like Fiedler or Qu Qiubai (1899-1935), who wanted to democratize literature, are wrong, or that the language policy of the mainland after 1949 does not have its merits, but in the very end the reformers went too far and helped to create a new gap! Light reading became even lighter, instead of being lifted up in order to meet serious literature, which of course should have been simplified. The new gap is now the gap between the mass production of light fiction and the “happy few,” at the edge of society, who create works which will definitely be read a hundred years from now.

Is there a standard which allows us to separate good literature from less good literature? I think there are many norms which can help us. Characteristic of a good writer is *le mot juste*, as Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) puts it. That is the right word in the right place. This word will not be expected; instead, it rather surprises the readership. Most pieces of contemporary literature, however, owe their extent and success to words, sentences, even passages and plots that the reader can easily anticipate. It is not the writer who is writing; it is “everyman” writing through the help of a certain author. But the language of literature should be unmistakable. So without being told who wrote what, when asked to read an excerpt, I should be able to guess that this novel is written by Zhang Ailing (1920-1995) and that novel is written by Wang Anyi (b. 1954), as long as I am familiar with their language.

Good and unmistakable language does not only demand the right word, but also the correct sentence and a new mode of thinking that will find a new form. As all kinds of form seem to be already worn out in literature, it might be difficult to come up with something totally new. In this field one might be only able to make minimal progress. Therefore, a writer will concentrate more on the “invention” of words and the arrangement of sentences, which have to carry a unique world outlook. We find something like this in the poetry of Xia Yu (b. 1956), who prefers to be transcribed in the traditional way as Hsia Yü. In her case, new forms of poems were possible as she produces (even prints?) her collections in Taipei herself.<sup>[8]</sup>

German critics like to deal with questions like “What is good literature?” They often come up with clear criteria, which might also help us to further our discussion of literature in Chinese language. Take for instance Hans-Dieter Gelfert (b. 1937), who once taught English literature at the Free University of Berlin. He published a book in 2004 which bore the subtitle “How to separate good books from bad books.”<sup>[9]</sup> His arguments and examples are very convincing. Let me present you some of his findings. In his eyes a piece of art should be “accomplished” in the sense that one cannot think of adding something to it or taking something away from it. The early poetry of Zheng Chouyu (b. 1934) would be a good model. An accomplished work should bear a world of its own in itself, i.e., it should be of universal, original and complex character. Bai Xianyong’s (b. 1937) *Taibeiren* for instance could stand for the universal picture of all those who have lost their homes. Li Ang’s (b. 1952) novel *The Butcher’s Wife* might perhaps represent the complex mind of a Chinese woman, and Luo Zhicheng’s (b. 1955) poems are quite unique, insofar as they depict the world of Taiwan through the aspects of dream, memory and journey.

### **III. Choice of language**

To be multilingual has a long tradition in Europe. For many centuries, German scholars used to write in Latin and / or French, in addition to learning how to write well in German. When they finally succeeded during the age of Goethe, they were still able and often willing to make use of foreign languages in their works. The question that might come up here is: Do languages express the same thought and mood? Is it possible to say and to write what one has on his / her mind in any language? I doubt this very much. Chinese scholars living in America told me that they prefer to write their academic studies in English, as English would be more precise than Chinese in their eyes. This is something that even a writer of Chinese poems and novels confirms. Chantelle Tiong, who is creative in Mandarin, English and Malay, as well as a translator from German, declares to be more calm or rational (*lixing* 理性) when thinking in English.<sup>[10]</sup> Perhaps the scholars and the author are right, in that Chinese is a more aesthetic than academic language. This question, however, shall not bother us here. I am more interested in Chinese writers who either change their language or write in two languages.

Since Adelbert von Chamisso (1781-1838), who changed from French to German and left us with excellent works of German literature, Germany has a tradition of

attracting foreigners to become German writers for more than 200 years. Meanwhile Chinese join their ranks. The first probably was Chow Chung-cheng (1908-1996, 周仲铮), who left China in 1928 for Paris and finally settled down in Germany.<sup>[11]</sup> She was a very successful painter in Bonn, where she also started writing and publishing her autobiographic novels and stories for children since the 1950s. In some respect she is a forerunner of what I call “Wild Swans” literature. This is a kind of autobiographical writing that places women in the centre, deals with the East / West aspect, and reflects upon the loss and gain of life far away from one’s home and mother. As Chow Chung-cheng was a protégé of Hu Shi (1891-1962) when she was a young rebel, and as all her (German) writings are now collected in the Museum of Modern Chinese Literature of Peking, she is worth examining, as some people in Bonn have already discovered. She is now buried together with her German husband in Peking, according to her wish at Wan’an Gongmu close to the Fragrant Hills.

The next to mention is the poetess Xu Pei (b. 1966, 徐沛), who lives in Cologne and writes decent poetry. She came to Germany in 1988 and studied German literature. She has already published six volumes of poetry in German which were designed by Germany’s most famous artists such as Baselitz, Immendorff and Lüpertz. One might not agree with her political actions, but one has to acknowledge that her poetry deserves our attention. Differing from Chinese writers abroad who continue to write about China, she is not bound to her former motherland. For instance, in her collection *Lotus Feet*<sup>[12]</sup>, she has chosen feet and shoes as a leitmotif for dealing with the plight of women.

The most successful Chinese writer in German is Luo Lingyuan (b. 1963, 罗令源). Living in Berlin since 1990, she has since 2005 published five novels with dtv. DTV means “German Paperback Publishing House”: it only brings books on the market that sell at least 10,000 copies a piece. She writes about Chinese at home and abroad. The present time is her metier, be it contemporary Germany or China. Her stories treat situations of daily life mixed with a slight strain of humour. Her latest novel *The Stars of Shenzhen*<sup>[13]</sup> depicts a Chinese tycoon who wants to build a skyscraper in Shenzhen but finally fails because of, among other things, corruption. The author knows how to write a story, but what she offers are well-known and predictable narratives of women, money and success or failure. Luo Lingyuan prefers to write in German for a simple reason: she need not fear censorship. When she translates her own novels for the Chinese market, scissors in her mind, she

rewrites accordingly.

From the last point of view, writing in a different voice must necessarily create a work that cannot be completed and published in one's mother tongue. I am, however, not so much interested in this point, because it is of minor importance. Why? Censorship puts a writer under external pressure. This pressure is of political, not of aesthetic nature. It does not lead to an inner tension. A possible inner tension would have an impact upon language and thought. I see this kind of tension in the works of Zhang Ailing.

One might think that the best translator of one's own work is the author him / herself. I do not agree. Translation needs distance. One should not improve, not rewrite what one translates. A writer, however, will feel more than a translator any tiny bit that escaped from one's treatment in the first or second language during the writing process, so that he / she might develop the tendency to rewrite a work of art in the second language instead of translating it. And this is what makes the difference between the English (1954) and the Chinese (1955) edition of *Rice-Sprout Song*. Zhang Ailing wrote this novel during her stay in Hong Kong (1952-1955).

Unfortunately Chinese scholars rarely pay attention to works of Chinese writers written in a foreign, predominantly English, language. They often think that the translation is either the original, or is at least identical with the English version. But this is not true. The English original of *Rice-Sprout Song* reads better than the Chinese translation done by Zhang Ailing herself. Consider the opening lines:

In this country town the first buildings in sight were a string of exactly identical thatched privies, about seven or eight of them. They had a deserted air despite the occasional whiff of faint odor in the wind. The afternoon sun shone palely on the bleached thatch.

After the privies came the shops. And above the single row of little white shops towered the dark bulk of the hill, capped by two misty blue daubs that were distant peaks.

On the other side of the pebble-paved street the ground dropped away into a deep ravine. A stone parapet ran the whole length of the road. A woman came out of one of the shops with a red enamel basin full of dirty water, crossed the street and dashed the waste over the parapet. The action was somehow shocking, like pouring slops off the end of the world.

一到了这小镇上，第一先看见长长的一排茅厕。都是迎面一个木板照壁，加在大石头上，半遮着里面背对背的两个坑位。接连不断的十几个小茅棚，里面一个人也没



有。但是有时候一阵风吹过来，微微发出臭气。

走过这一排茅厕，就是店铺。一排白色的小店，上面黑郁郁地矗立着一座山，山头上又现出两抹淡青的远山。

极窄的一条石子路，对街拦着一道碎石矮墙，墙外望出去什么也没有，因为外面就是陡地削落下去的危坡。这边一片店里走出一个女人，捧着个大红样瓷脸盆，过了街，把一盆脏水往矮墙外面一倒。不知道为什么，这举动有点使人吃惊，像是把一盆污水泼出天涯海角，世界的尽头。

It would not make much sense to compare the English original with the Chinese version. They are too different, but they share the main idea, that there is something that dirties the whole world. Actually the scene of pouring away waste water or manure is a scene one could still watch in the Peking of the 1970s. By the way, it is also a scene through which Li Ang opens her novel *Kandejian de Gui* (看得见的鬼, 2004), but even more drastically.<sup>[14]</sup>

Recently Amanda Hsu (Hsu Yuk-kwan) from Lingnan University (Hong Kong) published the idea that Chinese studies are dominated by Peking, and that so called minor literatures such as from Hong Kong are neglected by scholars. There is something in what she says. Literature from Hong Kong or from Taiwan, for example, does not really have a market in Europe.<sup>[15]</sup> But the mainland does have it. Why? This is not only for political reasons. More likely is the engagement of the Chinese authors. In marked contrast to their colleagues from Overseas, they are applying for grants in Germany all the time. There is almost not even one famous Chinese poet or novelist who has not been to Germany for a reading, for creative writing, for conferences. Many of them stayed for a long time or came very often, so that they are quite well-known in German speaking countries and can publish their books in German translation easily.

The same can hardly be said of other Chinese writers. They are not really eager to apply, and seldom come. But when I had the rare opportunity to present Zheng Chouyu and Luo Zhicheng at the international literature festival of Berlin in 2005, all sessions with them were well-attended. Readings of and with Leung Ping-kwan in recent years were crowned by similar success in German, Austrian and Swiss cities. But in all cases one should note, it was not Taiwan or Hong Kong, who made an encounter with literature beyond the mainland possible. It was always the German, Austrian or Swiss side which put in their efforts, money and time.

So if the dominance of “Peking” in Chinese studies and other fields should be