CHINESE-WESTERN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE THEORY AND STRATEGY

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PREFACE

Horst Frenz

For an outsider deeply concerned with the study of comparative literature, the Hong Kong Conference on East-West Comparative Literature is a reminder of the earlier debates which took place in the American universities decades ago. How do we define comparative literature? What does the term mean, and should we not find a better one? What are the methods of comparing works of literature from different countries—of genres, movements, trends, motifs, themes and characters? And what are the criteria for investigating the relationship between literature and such human endeavors as fine arts, music, philosophy? Most of these issues have been settled, and we have progressed beyond the discussion of principles and methods.

Since the background of most of the earlier American comparatists was European, it is not surprising that the study of comparative literature in the United States started out to be Europe-oriented. It took some time before the course of comparative literature studies was steered in different directions, and I am happy to say that the once frequent argument that we must not spread ourselves too thin—i.e. confine ourselves to the West—is hardly ever heard among my American colleagues today. Inherent in this early emphasis on the "western" world was a curious phenomenon—the absence of American literature in comparative studies. This, too, has changed, and we now find numerous investigations (and courses in institutions of higher learning) which treat American literary works from a comparative perspective.

I make these observations in order to point out that Chinese comparatists have been able to avoid two major obstacles to the

development of our discipline—they have readily accepted the term East-West comparative literature, and Chinese literature has been assumed to be basic to a comparative approach. At the Chinese University of Hong Kong, a close working relationship between the Department of Chinese, the Department of English, and the Comparative Literature Division is considered essential, and this symposium has become an important contribution to humanistic studies.

What comparatists in the East—as well as in the West—will have to contend with is that in the area of literary criticism there will probably never be a consensus of opinion. As in the past, schools of criticism—such as New Criticism, Structuralism, Formalism, Semiotics—will continue to vie with each other, and I have serious doubts that there will ever be a critical theory which will be congenial to Asian and western comparatists alike.

One other point needs to be made. Too often we in the West like to think of Asian literature rather than literatures, of Asian culture rather than Asian cultures. Conversely, Asians frequently view Western literature and culture as a unit. Such assumptions are fallacious. Rather, we must speak of Asian philosophy, religion and literature in the plural. I am reminded of the comments by the late Charles A. Moore, who maintained that thinking of the Far East as a philosophical unit is "unrealistic, unfair, and certainly untrue to the facts," even if there are certain tendencies Asian philosophers have in common. A similar statement can be made about the field of Asian letters.

Finally, the remarkable success of this symposium brings to mind suggestions for future scholarly discussions in such areas as the relations between Chinese and other national literatures and cultures, inter-Asian studies and the practice and theory of translation. To judge from this first Conference, subsequent symposia will go a long way to solidify the study of East-West comparative literature in Asia.

FOREWORD

A. O. Aldridge

If one were required to isolate the key-note of this significant conference, it might be found in the modest subtitle of Heh-hsiang Yuan's opening address, "An Inquiry into Possibilities." As he suggests, the investigation of relations between the literatures of the eastern and western hemispheres has not reached the stage where conclusions can be more than tentative. Although there is no reason for abandoning the view that the clusters of literatures in these two areas developed for the most part independently, many [parallels] between them are, nevertheless, being gradually discovered. As the motivating spirit in the organizing of the conference, Yuan stressed the need for guiding principles and concrete objectives in order to preserve cooperative efforts at research from degenerating into aimless floundering.

Of the seven papers presented here, four take up the general concept of adapting western methods of literary criticism to eastern texts, and each of the other three offers a concrete illustration of the application of a particular method.

I fully agree with Yuan's emphasis on cultural pluralism, but instead of using the great diversity in cultural traditions as an argument against affinity studies, as he seems to do, I would use it as a reason for rejecting the frequently expressed goal of attaining a common poetics for evaluating literary and artistic works in the two hemispheres. Taking England and Japan as examples, it is obvious that esthetic differences represent a major ingredient in their cultural identities. Even within individual cultures such as the English or the Japanese there exists a considerable degree of esthetic pluralism: some writers and artists in either culture, for example, advocate balance and symmetry;

others favor irregularity and asymmetry. Esthetic standards within single cultures, moreover, change with the times. Much has been made of the absence of the epic—a long narrative in poetic form —in the Chinese tradition; and many epics exist in the West. Some western critics such as Edgar Allan Poe, however, argue that the epic genre is deficient esthetically—that the essence of poetry is destroyed by length—that a long poem is a contradiction in terms. Superficially, Poe's structures seem to be a vindication of the Chinese tradition and as such an argument in favor of a common poetics, but actually his attitude merely serves to illustrate the lack of esthetic agreement in the West.

Yuan is certainly right in objecting to studies which "impose" established western models on the East, or which draw attention to elements in eastern literatures resembling those in the West in a merely superficial manner. It is, nevertheless, possible to discern resemblances in literary works in two cultures without seeking to impose one upon the other. Indeed the imposing of models has nothing to do with pointing out affinities or resemblances in style, structure, mood or idea between two works which have no other connection. The discerning of analogies without question of influence has been widely used as an instrument for drawing together the literatures of the West, and it may be legitimately used in the broader context of East-West relations. It may also be used from the perspective of the West as well as the East, that is, in showing how western works resemble those in the East as well as in the reverse direction.

As an example of superficial and misleading affinities, Yuan cites a comparison of the feeling for nature in the English poet Wordsworth and that of a Chinese poet, T'ao Yuan-ming, objecting that the comparison overlooks fundamental differences in their conception of the manner in which a separation between mind and body may be obtained. Yuan, nevertheless, accepts Anthony Thorlby's vindication of the principle of esthetic awareness in recognizing not identical, but merely similar elements in kindred genres. Yuan quotes approvingly, and properly so, in my opinion, the following passage from Thorlby:

> There need be no factual connexion between the

> two examples, but the comparatist must know how to juxtapose them. If he goes far afield for his comparisons, this is not in order to prove any thesis of universal philology or historical evolution or structural esthetics, but primarily for the pleasure of the thing, to broaden the basis of his experience, as an adventure.

Irving Babbitt, in a classic diatribe against romanticism, favorably compared the dependence upon nature in Taoist philosophy to the primitivism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This affirmation of similarity may be even farther afield than that between Wordsworth and T'ao Yuan-ming, but it has been widely accepted in the United States. Both Wordsworth and Rousseau are ordinarily regarded as romantic writers, but their resemblances to each other are probably much less striking than the affinities of either one to Taoist philosophy.

Professor Yuan reveals his awareness of the distrust of comparative literature manifested by some professors of the national literatures, whether Chinese and Japanese in the East, or French and German in the West. This may explain his theory that an inherent contradiction weakens the discipline. As I interpret his remarks, he finds two contradictions or contrasts: one between the relative homogeneity of the "Western heritage dimension" and the tremendous diversity in the rest of the world, resulting in the relative ease of studying writings belonging to the former, and the considerable problems involved in expanding studies to include the "global dimension"; the second between the need of "narrowing down the scope of our pursuit" in order to define its objectives and that of broadening its province to include all parts of the world. One cannot emphasize too strongly the contrast between what is known as the West and what is known as the East. The West, as Yuan indicates, is more or less unified and homogenous with its Judeo-Christian tradition in religion and its Greco-Roman tradition in literature. The East in the present conference has usually meant China, but in the broadest sense it also includes the cultures of the Near East, India, Japan and the Pacific. The global dimension must also take into consideration the cultures of Africa.

The literary contrast between East and West resides more in the linguistic differences between the various nations in each area than it does in divergent esthetic views. Indeed there has been a remarkable unanimity in the attitudes of one part of the world towards the literary masterpieces of the other; critics from the East have not argued that some western masterpieces have been overvalued, and sought to place others with more resemblance to eastern works in their place; nor have critics from the West reacted in a similar fashion towards eastern works. The obvious cultural diversities between East and West, in my opinion, do not call for any limitation in the materials and methodologies of comparative literature beyond those required by reason and good sense. Instead the emphasis should be in the other direction, that is, in considering as valid sources for investigation all literatures, major and minor, throughout the globe. I believe in a broadening rather than in a narrowing down of "the scope of our pursuit."

Obviously there is a tremendous difference between the subject matter which can be embraced by an entire intellectual discipline and that which a single scholar may hope to encompass. Many western professors who are not sympathetic to comparative literature have expressed sentiments similar to those of Yuan's colleague who argued that since a Chinese scholar cannot master all the writers and works of a single dynasty, he had no time to devote to any other literature. The answer is to be found in selectivity. No single comparatist can deal with entire literatures any more than a single stonecutter of the Middle Ages could erect an entire cathedral. The comparatist is not an expert on every literature, and he should not be expected to have even a superficial knowledge of all literatures. Instead the comparatist specializes in certain narrowly circumscribed areas of particular literatures. He has a general knowledge of the major literary works in a variety of national cultures, together with a familiarity of the various methods of research, but his individual research projects are for the most part as limited and precise as those of his colleagues in single literatures. Comparative literature is a cooperative enterprise covering a vast and diverse area, and it is to be explored or conquered in narrow segments. In the days of exploration, it would have been impossible for any single European navigator to

cover in a lifetime the entire geographic expanse of the two American continents, but in the twentieth century any tourist can visit by jet airplane all of the major centers of population in three or four months. We may hope for a similar future progress toward universal coverage in the study of literature.

Any single comparatist would be justified, if he wishes, in discarding "some of the less significant authors and their works" in favor of the "important literatures," in Yuan's words, but from the perspective of literary study as an academic discipline, there exist no value hierarchies for admission. If literature is defined as the communication by means of written symbols when the purpose is to provide esthetic pleasure as well as convey a message, then all works, both major and minor, ancient and modern, must be accepted as legitimate objects of study, and no national literature has a privileged or superior position. This does not mean, however, that one must ignore the historical record, which indeed reveals that some literatures embody centuries of rich tradition whereas others are only now in the process of emerging. Nor does it mean that one cannot affirm values or erect standards of judgment. When a biologist maintains that ants and elephants are completely equal as legitimate material for study, for example, he is not placing ants and elephants on the same level, or suggesting that they have equal strength or intelligence. Nor is he maintaining that every individual biologist should devote equal attention to the two disparate species. He is merely affirming that all living organisms are the province of his intellectual discipline. The individual comparatist similarly chooses the individual works or theoretical problems to which he wishes to give special attention, but he still recognizes that the province of his discipline is universal. Yuan indeed implies assent to this principle by quoting Harry Levin's proposition that the comparatist must assume "an equal belief in the equal validity of all traditions constituting the unity of knowledge."

Yuan's special concern is to determine whether or not it is possible to arrive at a definition of "Comparative Literature East-West," and his major contribution consists in successfully formulating a working definition, if not an absolute one. One can hardly challenge the statement that comparative literature East-West

comprises "a branch of literary study which compares literary works of both the East and the West beyond the confines of national boundaries, seeking mutual understanding through exchange and comparison of ideas, denying not the uniqueness of a national tradition but giving its manifestation a new dimension and making Comparative Literature a universal medium of communication."

Significantly this definition speaks of comparing individual works of the East and the West rather than comparing the two cultures. Indeed comparative literature East-West at its best consists of treating the art of written communication with appropriate examples drawn from the two hemispheres. It is not primarily a medium of communication, but rather an analysis of forms of communication which resemble each other. Some critics have been reluctant to attribute to the discipline the function of promoting mutual understanding, perhaps one of the reasons for Douwe Fokkema's objection in the subsequent discussion to the combining of moral enthusiasm with scientific methodology. I agree that the fostering of international understanding is not one of the primary functions of literature, but, on the other hand, it cannot be denied that individuals who are acquainted with an alien culture—even on a superficial level—show much greater receptivity towards that culture than they would otherwise. I am not, of course, referring to political relationships, since it has been empirically proved that culture and politics do not necessarily go hand in hand. Cultural similarities are powerless to prevent civil wars, shifting alliances, and ideological splits such as the one between capitalism and communism which at present separates eastern and western Europe as well as the two Chinas.

Because of the discreteness of culture and ideologies, I question the view that "cultural and philosophical diversities" have given rise to the historically divergent views which have been expressed about comparative literature, particularly those associated with the so-called French and American schools. The method which stresses influence and reception, or *rapports de fait*, and considers comparative literature as a branch of literary history happened to be the first to develop, and French scholars were at the time the most productive. The method which admits in

addition, or rather recommends, the study of resemblances or affinities rather than source-influence relationships, and which discerns these resemblances by means of *rapprochment* or placing one passage in juxtaposition with another developed subsequently. At first the major practitioners were Americans, but eventually many Europeans followed their example. Neither method bears the imprint of French or American culture or philosophy. At present the two methods are practised indiscriminately by citizens of both France and the United States as well as of other countries in every part of the world. Scholars choose one or the other method not according to their cultural background but according to the nature of the problem in which they are interested. These fundamental methods have more recently been succeeded—but not superseded—by other techniques stressing linguistics and ignoring history. The latter techniques are, of course, well represented in the present conference. Those who pursue any of these methods are merely using [available] tools, not revealing cultural or philosophical conditioning. Incidentally, the method of relating literature to other disciplines such as sociology, psychology and the arts—which Yuan considers the primary characteristic of the American school—was originally rejected by American purists, including many eminent scholars. When universities as a whole developed the interdisciplinary approach to knowledge, however, nearly all American comparatists accepted this philosophy for their own area as well as the university at large.

Before treating the method which Yuan offers as the most efficacious for treating East-West relations, I should like to comment briefly on his reservations concerning comparatism as it has been practised in the past. He is right that the methodology associated with the French school has only limited application to East-West relations; not, in my opinion, because an emphasis upon material information implies the neglect of esthetic values, but because until recent times direct historical connections between the two cultures were either entirely lacking or merely fragmentary. There still remain, however, significant *rapports de faits* to be investigated. The nineteenth-century German poet, Heinrich Heine, for example, reported Goethe's self-satisfaction in hearing that scenes from his novel *Werther* were being depicted

on porcelain in China, and Heine in turn gloated upon hearing that an edition of his own poems had been published in Japan. Yuan at first seems to be even more intransigent towards the American school, on the grounds that its involvement of multiple disciplines renders the study of East-West relations so complex as to be impossible. He later relaxes his opposition, however, by observing that "for a Chinese scholar, the study of literature often involves the study of philosophy and art." He also accepts the axiom of the convertibility of poetry and painting, the theme, moreover, of the subsequent paper of Wai-lim Yip.

Yuan's preferred method seems to be a combination of the French and American methods. He proposes that the scholar isolate a cause and effect relationship in one literature and investigate the cultural and philosophical elements bearing upon the relationship. He would then isolate a similar cause and effect in another literature and pursue an identical investigation of relevant cultural and philosophical elements. Finally, he would bring the two pairs together for comparison, pointing out the parallel elements. I heartily approve of the combination of history of ideas and literature in this method, but I am afraid that its other features would drastically limit the possibilities of comparison. It would not be easy to find examples in either an eastern or a western literature of a cause and effect relationship which could be paired with one in the opposing literature; the demonstration of the parallels would be cumbersome; and the conclusions would probably be sociological or anthropological rather than literary.

Although this method may have been used successfully in Yuan's illustration of the investigation of ancient myths, to adopt it as an exclusive or even preferred method of research would almost bring comparative studies to a standstill. In my opinion, it is significant enough to isolate any extensive parallelism in theme, style or portrayal of human condition without requiring in addition the demonstration of similar causes and effects.

Yuan's example of close parallelism, Gogol's *The Inspector General* and Lao She's *Looking Westward to Ch'ang-an*, the latter "almost a copy" of the former, provides a superb model for East-West research; yet the parallelism is not based upon the causes and

effects leading to the creation of either work, but upon the internal resemblances in plot and characterization. As Yuan observes, the ideological backgrounds of the two works are diametrically opposite, but they reflect social reality in an identical manner; in treating them, therefore, the critical emphasis should be generic rather than sociological. There would also seem to be a good case to be made that Lao She wrote under the direct influence of his Russian predecessor, but even so it is the thematic and narrative resemblances which are essential. The same is, of course, true about the parallels between Lao She's *City of Cats* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Little need be said about the backgrounds of these works, for they have almost nothing in common. What counts is that both may be interpreted as dystopias, allowing for the portrayal of extensive thematic and generic parallels.

At this point a distinction needs to be made between the stylistic and the thematic elements which comprise literary genres. Style consists of mechanical or technical components such as rhyme schemes, metaphors, internal divisions or narrative voice, most recognizable and essential in such forms as the sonnet and the *haiku*. Theme consists of conceptual elements such as mixing of tragedy and comedy, character development or portrayal of reality, most recognizable and essential in such forms as the *bildungsroman* or the Utopia. To be sure, there is considerable overlapping, but usually either the technical or the conceptual dominates in particular genres. Yuan seems reluctant to admit studies which emphasize parallels in style without taking into consideration cultural differences, and he is also wary of attempts at periodization based on stylistic criteria.

It is probably impossible to devise a valid system of periodization which incorporates both eastern and western literatures before the twentieth century. Yuan observes, however, a concrete parallelism in the creation myths of both civilizations. Investigation of ancient mythologies may be extended to include myths and folklore of later centuries. Some fascinating parallels emerged during the conference, suggesting that this area may well be a fruitful one for subsequent scholarship.

The analysis of themes is closely related to the history of

ideas, a methodology which Yuan recommends as a means of discerning affinities between different cultures and the basic aspirations of man. Here again, I believe it is possible and desirable to separate the study of literary texts from the study of cultures. An author or a text, for example, may express ideas completely alien to the culture or climate of opinion in which he lives. Our mission as literary scholars is not primarily to compare cultures (a function of anthropology), but to observe parallels in ideas, themes and manifestations of the lyric, dramatic and narrative modes. Yuan is closer to the mainstream of our discipline when he agrees that comparative literature "is not comparison of different national literatures by setting one against another" than when he seeks new light "on the cause-effect relationship between two literatures."

In broaching the topic of criticism, Yuan seems to disengage himself from the prevailing effort of eastern scholars to affirm and to establish a common poetics for East and West. Certainly he warns against the dangers of misunderstanding and misrepresentation inherent in forcing western models upon Chinese works. I heartily concur with this caveat; indeed, as I have previously said, there is no more need for a common poetics than for a common religion. Nothing approaching a critical consensus exists in the West—opposing, even antithetical, theories compete with each other—and in recent years new ones have appeared and faded away with astonishing frequency. There would be no advantage in transposing this anarchy to the East. Classical Chinese criticism, moreover, as Yuan observes, comprises both intuitive and emulative branches. These are loosely parallel to a similar dichotomy in western neoclassicism. The Confucian emulative goals of moral integrity embodied in unity of form and content have their counterparts in Aristotelian principles of unity and imitation; whereas the concept of intuitive appreciation corresponds to European eighteenth-century notions such as *je ne sais quoi* and judging literary works by pointing out beauties and faults. It is not surprising, therefore, that the general discussion following Yuan's presentation developed into a debate over the relative merits of impressionistic and objective criticism in which opinion was not divided along geographic lines; some scholars

from the West defended impressionistic judgments, and others from the East argued for objectivity. The obvious conclusion is that neither the East nor the West has a monolithic approach to literature, and that the study of East-West relations cannot be based upon a single system of criticism.

In Chinese culture the inherent relationship between literature and the fine arts is probably more clearly established than in the West. As Yuan points out, the study of Chinese literature traditionally involves the study of painting, calligraphy and seal-carving. In the West, the concept of the resemblance between painting and poetry was accepted as commonplace from classical times until the late eighteenth century when Lessing pointed out an essential difference—that poetry describes consecutive action while sculpture portrays special relations confined to a particular moment of time. Wai-lim Yip, in summarizing the contrary arguments of Herder, Pound and others, relates the controversy to Chinese esthetic theory and poetic practice. His examples of arrested action or static description in Chinese poetry and of the passage of time in Chinese landscape painting are convincing arguments against the [absolute] application of Lessing's theory. Similar examples may be cited in western art, such as Picasso's "Guernica."

Going beyond these concrete illustrations, however, Yip maintains that poetry and painting are esthetically unified in the sense that both transcend the physical to arouse a feeling of something beyond or outside. In Ezra Pound's expression, the two means of communication possess a common bond or "inter-recognition," a type of energy or power which creates an esthetic state in the viewer or reader. In short, Yip believes that poetry and the plastic arts have an identical esthetic function. This is saying a great deal. Indeed, it is much too much to be defended in the limited scope of a conference paper. Yip's theories are based upon a particular esthetic, that of the Pound-Eliot coterie; certainly, they may fit the poetry of this school and of many Chinese exemplars as well, but they do not, as he suggests, apply to all poetry, all painting or all music in the West. These theories concern a certain type of lyric poetry, sometimes called pure poetry, which indeed has affinities to abstract painting, but there

are many other forms of poetry, including narrative, which, as Yip correctly affirms, Lessing had in mind. As lyric poetry resembles abstract painting and sculpture, so narrative and satirical forms resemble representational art. Because of Yip's emphasis on pure poetry, the discussion of his paper turned into a debate over absolute versus relative standards in esthetics. It is significant that the participants were about equally divided, but again not along East-West lines. The discussants on both sides, however, seemed to believe that some single principle should be found to explain all poetry rather than recognizing that there are many kinds of poetry and that each kind has its own standards. Some is discursive, some abstract, some concrete and some intellectual, whether in the West or the East. Poetry, like the arts, has its genres and sub-genres, and although all of them may be related and provide, as Yip declares, correspondences with the others, it does not follow that all forms work esthetically in the same way.

William Tay, in his treatment of aspects of Pound's poetics, offers additional light on the concept of static description. According to Pound, the metro poem records "the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective." In conformity with the notion of epiphany which he shared with Joyce, Pound maintains that "certain facts give one a *sudden insight* into circumjacent conditions, into their causes, their effects, into sequence, and law." Tay reveals that Pound believed that poetic language should comprise concrete, noun qualities and that, like the *haiku* and Chinese classical poetry, it should emphasize the technique of juxtaposition and the suppressing of linguistic connectives. As an illustration of his theories of the pictorial nature of the epigram, Pound found close similarities between the Anglo-Saxon *Seafarer* and Li Po's *Exile's Letter*. Pound developed these poetic theories, as Tay explains, not only for their esthetic values, but for their pragmatic ones as instruments for the education of the public, revitalizing the reader's imagination by shocking and upsetting him. Paradoxically, he succeeded esthetically, but not pragmatically, failing to create an audience for his work or his philosophy. Unfortunately for Pound, there were no William Tays to expound