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A Chinese
Perspective

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James J. Y. Liu

Edited by

Richard John Lynn

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James J. Y. Liu

Language—Paradox—Poetics

A Chinese Perspective

Edited and with
a Foreword
by Richard John Lynn

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Editor's Foreword

When Professor James J. Y. Liu suddenly fell ill during the winter of 1985–1986, he had just completed a draft of this book. Although it showed signs of haste in places and would have undergone further polishing by him had his health permitted, it was submitted for publication in its then present form. It gave him great pleasure and satisfaction when Princeton University Press accepted it for publication—this news reaching him just a few weeks before he died in May 1986. In the meantime, he had asked me to do all that was necessary to achieve publication, short of substantial revision of arrangement, translations, arguments, conclusions, and the like, and hoped that I would change things as little as possible. I have tried to carry out these wishes. The book that finally emerged from my editing is still very much his. I limited my contributions to rewriting certain passages for the sake of style or clarity, adding a number of reference notes, rewriting the notes and bibliographical entries for more consistency, adding some transitional phrases, sentences, and short passages where the flow of presentation seems to be too abrupt or disjointed, and making a few corrections of a factual nature. Such transitions and corrections—as well as significantly rewritten passages—are placed in brackets in order to identify them as my work. I also prepared the index and retyped the entire manuscript.

As a scholar and critic Professor Liu had unique gifts. In addition to a very fine intelligence and extraordinary linguistic skills—he seems to have had genuine *tiancai*, “Heaven-endowed talent”—his educational background also provided him with extraordinary opportunities. His schooling in Beijing in the 1930s and early 1940s was a mixture of traditional Chinese classical letters and modern Western-style subjects, including a great deal of English and American literature. His undergraduate education at Fu Jen [Furen] University (the Catholic University of Peking and the only university allowed to stay open in Beijing during the Japanese occupation) offered an exciting cosmopolitan mixture of professors from all over Europe for courses that together covered the major aspects of Western thought and culture—as well as gave Professor Liu the chance to take courses in Chinese literature and history with a number of knowledgeable traditional Chinese scholars and improve his skill at writing essays in classical Chinese. He concentrated in English literature and wrote a B.A. thesis on Virginia Woolf. After the war he entered National Tsing Hua University and began the study of English and French literature—he even had the opportunity of studying with Sir William Empson, who was then at both Tsing Hua and Peking universities. However, after one semester he left for England on a British Council scholarship and continued the rest of his formal education at the University of Bristol and Oxford University. This resulted in an M.A. thesis on Marlowe. He began his varied and brilliant teaching career at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and later moved on successively to Hong Kong University, New Asia College, University of Hawaii, University of Pittsburgh, University of Chicago, and finally Stanford University, where, except for brief periods of leave, he spent the last nineteen years of his life.

Professor Liu's background and training in Chinese classics and traditional scholarship on the one hand and Western literary studies on the other provided his teaching and writ-

ing, in effect, with a double-edged sword: he was a superb philologist and historian of Chinese literature and at the same time a perceptive and erudite critic who had a full working knowledge of modern and contemporary Western methods of literary analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. He had extraordinary control over all the premodern Chinese scholarly sources—bibliographies, encyclopedias, historical sources, individual literary collections, anthologies, and so forth, as well as the vast field of traditional criticism. He could read these materials with great precision and sensitivity—literally and in terms of their local, literary generic, and larger literary and cultural contexts. Since he was truly bilingual, his published translations of both poetry and prose into English are both accurate and fluent, often masterpieces of syntactic equivalence and the *mot juste*.

His approach to criticism kept evolving over the years—beginning with an alignment with I. A. Richards, William Empson, and the New Critics, and shifting later to phenomenologists such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Ingarden, and Dufrenne. Symbolist and postsymbolist poet-critics such as Mallarmé and T. S. Eliot also had considerable influence on him. However, he never merely adopted the views and methods of such Western critics and applied them wholesale to Chinese literature but instead worked out systems of critical theory and practice that synthesized elements from them together with approaches intrinsic to the Chinese tradition, especially those associated with certain figures whom he first called “Intuitionists” and later “Metaphysical Critics”—such as Yan Yu (ca. 1195–ca. 1245), Wang Shizhen (1634–1711), and Wang Guowei (1877–1927)—critics who in general often viewed literature as a manifestation of the universe, the Dao (Tao), and who were concerned with how writers apprehend the Dao and manifest it in their writings. One can chart the course of his development by reading a succession of his books, all of which are listed among the Works Cited here in this, his last effort: *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (1962), *Chinese*

Theories of Literature (1975), and *The Interlingual Critic: Interpreting Chinese Poetry* (1982). The bibliographies in the 1975 and 1982 books and the Works Cited here together contain the great majority of Professor Liu's publications—article-length as well as books—and the interested reader is advised to consult them.

I remember clearly when Professor Liu began to discuss with me some of the issues that were to occupy him for so long: the nature of Chinese poetic expression, how to induce systems of literary theory from the often unsystematic and fragmentary modes of critical discourse in China, how to build on the comparative study of Western and Chinese theories of literature to develop fruitful methods of practical criticism and interpretation—to name but some of them. Our association began during the autumn of 1966 at the University of Chicago. I had the subsequent good fortune to continue this discussion over much of the next twenty years—most of it at Stanford as his student, friend, and sometime colleague. I never expected to become his editor, a task that has proven to be both sad and happy—sad because this book is the last he will ever write, but happy because, in the course of editing, I have had the chance to discuss things with him, in effect, one more time.

In the table of contents to the original draft of this book, Professor Liu indicated that there was to be an Acknowledgment but did not indicate what or whom he wished to acknowledge. Subsequently, I discovered that he had obtained a grant from the Center of East Asian Studies, Stanford University, to cover the cost of typing that manuscript, a task completed by Robert H. Smitheram. I thus acknowledge here this grant and effort.

RICHARD JOHN LYNN

Palo Alto, California

June 1987

Introduction

The focus of this book is a kind of Chinese poetics that I name "the poetics of paradox" because it espouses the paradoxical view that in poetry, the less is said, the more is meant. Since this poetics originated from a paradoxical view of language seen in early Chinese texts, I deal first with the paradox of language. Instead of proceeding immediately to show how the paradoxical view of language led to the emergence of the poetics of paradox, I consider the nature of all poetics as a metaparadox in chapter 2, before presenting the poetics of paradox in chapter 3. In chapter 4, I discuss the implications of the poetics of paradox for interpretation and the paradoxical nature of interpretation itself. I further suggest possible points of convergence between the traditional Chinese poetics of paradox and contemporary Western poetics and hermeneutics.

Throughout the book I juxtapose Chinese and Western texts without regard for chronology. I do so not in an anti-historical or ahistorical spirit but for the following reasons. First, I am not concerned with claiming chronological priority for Chinese poetics, but with calling attention to a particular kind of Chinese poetics that is intrinsically interesting and that provides points of fruitful comparison with Western poetics. Second, I believe that only by means of juxtapositions of texts from two different traditions can we bring into relief

what is truly distinctive in each tradition. Third, such juxtaposition will also enable us to become aware of the unspoken presuppositions about the nature of language, poetry, poetics, and interpretation that underlie each tradition, thus paving the way for a genuinely comparative poetics, free from both Eurocentrism and Sinocentrism.

Writing in the context of Western literary history, Herbert Lindenberger remarked, "Often, too, the juxtaposition of works or events from widely separated periods can better illuminate historical constants and differences, continuities and disruptions, than would a chronological narrative."¹ Similarly, the juxtaposition of works from two unrelated cultures and in widely different languages can better illuminate cultural similarities and differences than would a chronological narrative. The similarities may provide a basis for synthesis and the differences may suggest new perspectives in which to view familiar problems.

In fact, what I call juxtaposition is similar to what Earl Miner calls alienation. Comparing Japanese and Western conceptions of art, Miner writes, "To deal as it were with prior assumptions of the familiar, one of the most useful procedures is alienation: the bringing to bear on the familiar of what differs but is comparable."² However, I have avoided the term "alienation" because, in the first place, with its various Marxian, Freudian, and Brechtian overtones, the term can easily be misunderstood, and second, having grown up in the Chinese cultural tradition but having lived in the West for more than three decades, I do not wish to have the question raised as to which culture I consider alien. I therefore prefer the neutral term "juxtaposition."

To give one example of unspoken presuppositions underlying Western and Chinese texts: juxtaposition reveals that, whereas Western critics generally have a mimetic conception of language, Chinese ones influenced by Daoism (Taoism) and Buddhism have what may be called a deictic conception. The former see language as *representing* reality; the latter see

it as *pointing to* reality. We shall see some of the consequences of this basic difference in conception of language for poetics.

Although the book as a whole is achronological (rather than synchronic, since I do not treat all texts as if they belonged to the same period), within each chapter the material is presented in chronological order, as far as feasible. Nonetheless, some cross-references to works from different periods are unavoidable.

The book is intended for students of Chinese literature as well as comparatists and others interested in general literary theory, poetics, and hermeneutics. For the convenience of those who can read Chinese, some Chinese characters are given in the text. These, however, are kept to a minimum; the characters for most isolated words, phrases, names, and book titles appear in the list of "Chinese Words and Names" and in the Works Cited.

All translations from Chinese works are mine, but some references to existing translations are given, either in the text or in notes. Throughout I follow the *pinyin* system of romanization.

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Language—Paradox—Poetics

The Paradox of Language

It should be made clear at the outset that I am concerned with the paradox of language rather than the language of paradox, which Cleanth Brooks identified with the language of poetry.¹ Nor am I concerned with a general survey of Chinese and Western theories of language, for which I have little competence and less inclination. However, I shall touch on such theories as they are relevant to the paradox of language.

The paradox of language may assume one of two basic forms, which may be considered the two sides of the same coin. In the first form, which may be called the obverse side of the coin, paradox arises from the seeming contradiction between the allegation made by many poets, critics, and philosophers, Eastern and Western, in earnest or in feigned despair, that language is inadequate for the expression of ultimate reality, or deepest emotion, or sublime beauty, and the eloquence with which the allegation is made. At any rate, if language is adequate to express the reality about itself, then the allegation cannot be true. Even on the level of everyday discourse, when we say, "Words fail me," we are expressing some kind of feeling, and when we say of something, "It is indescribable," we are giving it a kind of description. In the second form, which may be called the reverse side of the coin, the paradox arises from the seeming contradiction between asserting that ultimate reality, or deepest emotion, or

sublime beauty, can be expressed without words, and the very act of making this assertion in words. It was all very well for Śākyamuni to pick a flower and for his disciple Kāśyapa to smile with instant understanding, without either of them saying a word, but those who recount this legend as an example of wordless communication cannot help using words.²

The paradox of language features prominently in early Chinese philosophical texts of the Daoist school (Daojia, not to be confused with Daojiao, the later development of Daoism as an organized religion), especially the *Lao Zi* and the *Zhuang Zi*. Traditionally Lao Zi was said to have been an older contemporary of Confucius (551–479 B.C.); the appellation “Lao Zi” can be taken to mean simply “Old Master,” although, according to one tradition, his name was Lao Dan. Another tradition has it that his name was Li Er. Modern scholars have doubted his existence, let alone his authorship of the work attributed to him. Zhuang Zi is identified as Zhuang Zhou, who lived in the fourth century B.C. Both books are probably collections of sayings and parables rather than works by individual authors. However, to avoid the awkwardness of writing “the *Lao Zi* says” or “the *Zhuang Zi* says,” I shall sometimes refer to these two works by the names of their putative authors. My references are made to certain ideas and ways of thinking embodied in these works rather than to historical persons. Even when dealing with historically known authors, we need not regard the authors as the causes of the ideas expressed. As Jacques Derrida puts it: “The names of authors or doctrines have here no substantial value. They indicate neither identities nor causes. It would be frivolous to think that ‘Descartes,’ ‘Leibniz,’ ‘Rousseau,’ ‘Hegel,’ etc. are names of authors of movements or displacements that we thus designate. The indicative value that I attribute to them is first the name of a problem.”³ In a similar fashion I refer to Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi as a way of discussing the problem of the paradox of language.

Not only do the *Lao Zi* and the *Zhuang Zi* contain numerous passages about the paradox of language, but their very existence constitutes an illustration of the paradox, since both deplore, or pretend to deplore, the limitations of language. The familiar words found at the beginning of any traditional edition of the *Lao Zi* assert the inadequacy of language as a means of describing ultimate reality.

The *dao* that can be *dao*-ed is not the constant Dao;
The name that can be named is not the constant name.⁴

Most commentators and translators, of whom there are legion, agree that in the first sentence the first and third occurrences of the word *dao* should be taken as "way," and the second occurrence as "speak." An exception among Chinese commentators is Yu Zhengxie (1775–1840), who interpreted all three occurrences as "speak" or "speech." His interpretation has been eloquently repudiated by the eminent contemporary scholar Qian Zhongshu in his monumental work, entitled with ironic modesty, *Guanzhui bian*, which may be freely paraphrased, "Collection of Limited Views."⁵

Among Western scholars, Chad Hansen recently wrote: "The translation of the verbal use of *tao* [*dao*] is simply 'to speak.' Thus a *tao* reflects the features of a discourse or language."⁶ He therefore translated the first sentence as "speaking what can be spoken is not invariant speaking."⁷ This interpretation is too narrow and does not fit occurrences in many other passages where the Dao is described as the primary force of the universe. My translation attempts to preserve the pun involved (it is hoped that readers will realize that to be "*dao*-ed" is to be dubbed "Dao"). A freer version might say, "The way that can be weighed is not the constant Way," but purists will no doubt prefer the more orthodox rendering—"The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way," as given, for example, by D. C. Lau.⁸

In contrast to Hansen, who thinks that the word *dao* means a total system of names,⁹ I think Lao Zi's remark can be in-

interpreted as a denial of the possibility of any linguistic or semiotic system as such. In the terminology of Ferdinand de Saussure, Lao Zi is denying the possibility of language as *langue* but admitting the necessity of language as *parole*, for to call something Dao is a speech act, or an example of *parole*, but to think that this word is part of a constant system, or *langue*, would be a mistake. From Lao Zi's point of view, there could be no structuralist linguistics, which treats language as a closed system of signs. My using the terminology of Saussure, generally considered the founder of modern structuralist linguistics, to suggest that such a linguistics is not feasible is just another paradox.

Despite the assertion that the Dao cannot be named, Lao Zi nevertheless attempts to describe it in various ways and acknowledges the paradox in chapter 25.¹⁰

I do not know its name, but force myself to nickname it "Dao,"
Force myself to name it "great."¹¹

While admitting that language is necessary as a makeshift, Lao Zi also warns us that words are not permanent embodiments of reality. His thought here is comparable to Martin Heidegger's crossing out of "Being" (*Sein*) or Jacques Derrida's putting words under erasure (*sous rature*): all three struggle to name the unnameable and implicitly accept the paradox of language in its first basic form.¹²

A variation of the paradox appears in chapter 56.

One who knows does not speak;

One who speaks does not know.¹³

This couplet reminds one of the paradox presented by Epimenides (sixth century B.C.), the Cretan who declared, "All Cretans are liars."¹⁴ [This so-called liar paradox is an early example of logical paradox of the type "this statement is false."] As might be expected, some asked why, if this were so, did Lao Zi himself write anything, as the poet Bai Juyi [or