

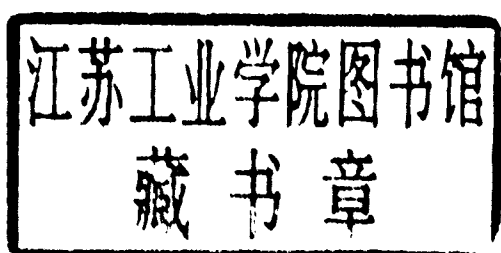
THE PROBLEM OF A CHINESE AESTHETIC



Haun Saussy

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OF A CHINESE
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H.S.

Note on Transcription and Abbreviations

The Wade-Giles transliteration system for Chinese words is used here (and quoted text silently revised in keeping with it) except in the case of names of authors who publish in English and have their own preferred spelling. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Works for which a chapter-and-verse or paragraphing reference is generally accepted (e.g., the *Analects* of Confucius or Plato's dialogues) are noted in that form, and specific editions are cited only when necessary. The following abbreviations are used in the Notes and Bibliography:

BIHP	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology</i> (Academia Sinica, Nankang, Taiwan)
BMFEA	<i>Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities</i> (Stockholm)
ch.	<i>chüan</i> ("volume" of a Chinese book)
CLEAR	<i>Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews</i>
HJAS	<i>Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies</i>
LH	Leibniz mss held in the Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, Hannover; as catalogued by Eduard Bodemann
Li	<i>Li chi chu-shu</i> (SSCCS ed.)
LSJ	Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry S. Jones, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i>

<i>MEGA</i>	Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, <i>Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
<i>Shih</i>	<i>Mao Shih chu-shu</i> (SSCCS ed.)
<i>Shu</i>	<i>Shang Shu chu-shu</i> (SSCCS ed.)
<i>SKCS</i>	Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu
<i>SPPY</i>	Ssu-pu pei-yao
<i>SPTK</i>	Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an
<i>SMSCS</i>	Ch'en Huan, ed., <i>Shih Mao shih chuan shu</i>
<i>SSCCS</i>	Juan Yüan, ed., <i>Shih-san ching chu-shu</i>
<i>Tso</i>	<i>Ch'un-ch'iu Tso chuan chu-shu</i> (SSCCS ed.)
<i>W</i>	Hegel, <i>Werke in zwanzig Bänden</i>

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Introduction

Kant's assistant, a theology student who was at a loss as to how to unite philosophy with theology, once asked Kant what books he should consult.

KANT: Read travel descriptions!

ASSISTANT: There are sections of Dogmatics that I don't understand . . .

KANT: Read travel descriptions!

—Walter Benjamin

The book that follows is a hybrid, and not just in its choice of subjects. It started as a study of a few definite questions in Chinese poetics and could not be kept from spreading into the territory of big general problems. I hope it may be a telescope useful to people who come to it from either end.

The key word, if there can be only one, in this book's title should be "problem." Why so? The book presents the results of several years' experiments with translation, and translation is nothing but problems.¹ Sometimes in the course of this book I translate texts; elsewhere I try to translate (or to weigh the possibility of translating) implicit systems of concepts; and here and there, faced with a dilemma, I have to admit impediment. We who translate tend to talk less about successes and more about trade-offs, and our modesty is usually justified. If a translation is a trading post, it is one in which "the most precious and the lowliest wares do not always lie far apart from one another—they mingle in our eyes, and often, too, we catch sight of the bottles, boxes, and sacks in which they were transported."² The piling-up of disposable externals (synonyms, glosses, footnotes, parenthetical remarks) marks a translator who is honest or confused, or both, for although it is good to know what is essential and what is incidental, the translator who is also a diligent reader may be of several minds about that question and prefer, when possible, to save the original wrappings.

What of the essentials of my book and the translating it tries to do can be called new? Some old methods are taken to new lengths, and some familiar texts are juxtaposed in new ways. The book's continuous argument, as it appears here and there in the studies composing it, pits the analytic methods of rhetoric against, first, the synoptic unity of a definite culture; second, a set of historical narratives forming the basis of the synoptic view; and finally, a categorical, that is, a philosophical, formulation of historical problems. If rhetoric outlives these many tests and trudges on toward the finish, the story brings about, not just rhetoric's triumph, but its education: surviving the tests means learning new rules at every stage.

To emphasize the discontinuous and the topical, the book consists of chapters on the theory of allegory today as compared to the practice of translation by seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries to China and by one of their correspondents, Leibniz; on the history of the Chinese *Book of Odes* and its interpretative tradition (sometimes called allegorical); on the allegorical program of the *Odes* as I reconstruct it, half historically and half through rhetorical analyses; and on the place of China (no small place, but that needs showing) in Hegel's efforts to write and teach world history.

I offer new conclusions, or new arrangements of old hypotheses, on the nature of figures of speech in ancient Chinese poetry and on the relation of aesthetic thinking and practice to other kinds of action to which the aesthetic realm is sometimes, in certain moods of certain traditions at certain moments, contrasted. My colleagues in Chinese literature may be alarmed at my determination to make literary theory out of historical documents or wish I had spread some of those documents out for a period-by-period analysis instead of bunching them together as alternative positions; those whose main engagements are with literary theory may wonder at my failure to declare a theory of my own and feed it on a good diet of Chinese texts. I have no good answer to these objections. The choice of a comparative subject is always debatable. One penny flipped fifty times gives the same results as fifty pennies flipped once; would that comparative literature were so simple a field that

the extension of its problems made up a variation, and not a check, on their depth!

Since I prize the business of getting to conclusions more highly than I do most conclusions, I try to let the how-questions take precedence over the what-questions. As a rule, I try to resolve problems of literary history and comparative literature by what is called (always unattainably) close reading. Not that my reading is closer than anybody else's, or that I use the method with exceptional purity; but I try to give reading the last word, especially where the problems I face would seem to lend themselves to other styles of interpretation. The comparative side of the job has been made easier, if that is the right word, by the fact that the Chinese corpus I start with has always been seen as a thicket of interpretative puzzles.



At one end of the scale, then, the book handles philological problems in the reception of a lyric anthology; at the other, it heads toward the horizon of a universal human history (that discredited project), how it is to be written and understood. It is therefore about—it is a sample of—cultural relations that are apt to seem strained in some readers' eyes. "The Western image of China," as a questioner at an early presentation of part of this work put it, seems to be a subject entirely different from the present-day researcher's good-faith effort to understand the Chinese themselves. The contemporary use of the word "image" supposes this. What Hegel *knew* about China is not much more than Plato knew about Egypt or, some might insinuate, Atlantis. Is not the project, then, built around a coincidence, the occurrence in unrelated texts of a handful of proper names, or better yet a noncoincidence, a mistaken identity? To call on Goethe the translator again, "just as a metaphor, carried too far, begins to stumble, so a comparative judgment becomes less acceptable, the farther it is carried."³ What if the trick of calling Hegel's China and the China of his contemporary Ch'en Huan "China" were just one of those metaphors, less acceptable the more sense we try to wring from it?

This book's various chapters have their common object not in a

real but in an ideal or scriptural context, the China constructed (and then interpreted) by those various witnesses. This sounds agnostic, but the antiquity of one of the book's main subjects permits "construction" to be read in a sense more literal than modish. The compilers of the *Book of Odes*, the authors of the *Book of Documents*, and so forth created, in the same measure as Homer and Hesiod, the nation they celebrated, and in that sense they are not at all unlike Hegel trying to derive the concept of China from a speculative world-historical logic or Leibniz hoping to establish, through a kind of pun, the mutual tolerance of Catholic theology and Chinese physics. In Chapters 3 and 4 I push the idea of "construction" a little harder and find reasons for believing that the invention of China and the invention of Chinese poetic language are not only roughly contemporary but also related events.

China has always been, is always still, in the process of being invented; but does one invent it in whatever way one pleases? "China" names a country, of course, but it more accurately names an international culture; and "culture" is the identity-tag of a question having, these days in North America at least, a moral as well as an epistemological side. Cultures are—to paraphrase a received wisdom—spheres independent of one another, systems of standards that are not to be judged by other systems of standards, all such systems being, in any case, endowed with equal rights to existence (and rights no more than equal: to privilege one over the others is to risk being accused of cultural tunnel vision, a form of moral blindness). Knowing about cultures is a virtue and a way to virtue. For the crusading arm of the academy—and I am hardly in a position to count myself out of it—this way of putting things is now part of the all-purpose justification for the continued existence of the humanities, a stump speech it is unfortunately always necessary to go on making.

Accepting this definition of culture as the genus to which China belongs shapes one's own work and the public's probable response to it. Thanks to the intercession of other cultures, says Tzvetan Todorov, "I read myself between quotation marks."⁴ In classrooms, courtrooms, and myriad places in between, what Emile Durkheim

said some eighty years ago of religions (as spokesman for a new university discipline in a newly secular Third Republic) has become applicable to cultures: "Fundamentally, then, there is no such thing as a false religion. Every religion is true in its own way. . . . A religion is a consistent system of beliefs and practices concerned with sacred things ('sacred' meaning separate, forbidden): beliefs and practices that unite in a single moral community, called a 'church,' all those who belong to it."⁵ True religions (the only kind) are like unhappy families: each of them true in its own way. As prelude to getting the sociology of religion started, Durkheim's definition makes a clean break between the formal character of being a religion and the content-character of religions. What is automatically true of all religions *qua* examples of religion (the predicate of being true) is also true of none of them singly, or *qua* itself. The content of religious representations is no longer an object of investigation, except as that content is mediated by the new definition of religion. The individual religions' *façons* (manners) of being true then become the sole focus of attention. Indeed it is only as the epithet "true" has been reshaped by that definition that it will continue to have a meaning in the sociology of religion. The researcher who forgets that turns into an apologist, a purveyor of the mere inventory of the subject, for all religions, however eclectic and tolerant, are bound to have propositions they assert as true.

Is the split between religion and religions (or that between the concept of culture and the demands of any particular culture) anything more than a logical taboo, a rule observed by the church of the sociological method? The question is raised by the generic character of Durkheim's definition itself.⁶ (An American analogue would be the "establishment of religion" clause of the First Amendment.)⁷ Reasons for the taboo are not hard to supply. If the sociological method is just one "religion" among others, then the truth of its conclusions will only be the bracketed, automatic truth of its particular religious style; and if it is to be situated outside and above the religions, it will appear to have gained that status magically, by becoming "sacred, separate, forbidden." Either way, the

method would become one of its own objects, one of its own examples.

The ethnology of ethnology is a growing field, and the relativity principle has come in for its share of attention. Just as the establishment clause of the First Amendment would lose its prescriptive power if it were taken as another instance of the behavior it is supposed to govern, so too ethnography, in order to record and preserve the variety of human societies, needs to be able to locate its evidence on an invariant yardstick, a supra-cultural principle hovering above the cultural fray—the definition of “culture” in flush times or “me and what I felt” in more nervous ones.⁸ Is anthropology self-consistent? Can its methods maintain their separateness from the realm of examples, or are they fated to end up on the pile of ethnic curiosa too? Anthropology must, but can’t, become an example unto itself; and so an empirical discipline becomes a philosophy of reflection. The inconsistency of the discipline is the proof (maybe Pyrrhic) of its will to be consistent.

Here the investigator of literary language finds work to do—more and more work, since we are all anthropologists nowadays. Tics are revealing. Awareness that there is more to world history than we heard about in school and a sense that one ought to do something about all those people, even just acknowledge their existence, leads writers of every persuasion and rank (professors in their *summae* and undergraduates in midterm essays) to say “Western civilization,” “Western metaphysics,” where a few years ago they might have put “culture” or “philosophy” with no geographic qualifiers. Let us call this a step toward self-knowledge (knowledge of oneself *as a self*) and go on to look at the ways in which this knowledge recognizes its newfound self. No gesture can long go uninterpreted. Is the modifier restrictive or nonrestrictive (as a grammarian might put it)? Are we talking about “civilization, that is, the Western kind,” or about “civilization—this thing specific to the West”? The apparent modesty of such phrases (being no spokesman, I can only imagine using them modestly) comes quickly to seem to mean that the author knows something about other varieties of metaphysics, philosophy, and so forth, and wants

to underline a contrast; or knows enough about “Western civilization” to have seen around it and known its limits.⁹ That shows great confidence, at least if “Western civilization” is one’s usual haunt. Is the self the sort of thing that *oneself* can put quotation marks around?

The question is worth asking, although the practical point of view may lead to a different answer from the theoretical view. Jean Seznec and Anthony Grafton have seen the habit of treating the classical past as a bounded and, above all, foreign object as the Renaissance scholar’s properly epochal, and self-defining, break with a more recent past.¹⁰ The temptation to talk about self and other as unambiguous categories neatly sealed off from one another is especially strong, no doubt for historical reasons, among students of China. A. C. Graham begins his article “‘Being’ in Classical Chinese” by saying: “The Chinese language is especially important for *any* study of the relation between linguistic structure and the formation of philosophical concepts. . . . It is one of the few pure examples of an isolating language, without inflection or agglutination. . . . Chinese is also the one language in which there is an important philosophical tradition *entirely* independent of philosophies developed in Indo-European languages” (my italics).¹¹ Such independence is grounds for optimism: an object that has so little in common with the Indo-European philosophical subject provides the opportunity (and the felt obligation) of verifying or revising one’s convictions from the ground up. China is not a country or a language but a world—the kind of parallel world in which Leibniz would have wanted to carry out experiments on causality and Providence.

The relation between us (whoever we are) and China becomes, then, a way of learning about the relations of necessity and contingency, nature and culture, genus and example, sign and meaning. Speaking quite generally, comparison is precious because it yields evidence. *-Vidence* means “sight, seeing, what may be seen,” but what of the *e*-? “Out, outward” translates it, and the phenomenology of perception—the fact that what is seen stands out against a background—explains it.¹² Evidence from as far out there as it is

possible to go stands out as no other evidence can. Exoticism contributes more than a backdrop to anthropology: it is tied up with the epistemological topics of reference and perception. *Ta exō* in Plato's *Theaetetus*, 198 c 2, means "things outside the mind"; in Thucydides 1.68 it means "foreign affairs."¹³ For the philosophical reader, travel journals are romances of reference, a diet of evidence and exhibits. (One edition of the French novelist Victor Segalen's China notebooks is titled, tellingly, *Voyage au pays du Réel*.) For travelers as dissimilar as Roland Barthes and Clifford Geertz, the voyage out is a trip into an outside where the outside—the public, outer, side of the sign, for instance—can, at last, exist for itself, heedless of a corresponding "inside."¹⁴

And Chinese evidence is exotic enough to give empiricism a speculative twist. Graham has said that "the great interest in exploring alien conceptual schemes is in glimpsing how one's own looks from outside, in perceiving for example that the Being of Western ontology is culture-bound, not a universally valid concept."¹⁵ That is quite a "for example." We are invited to *perceive*, as a piece of evidence (for example) is perceived, that there are only examples, and that an example, say Being, has only culture to be an example of. Do such examples leave philosophy (which does not often get to perceive and has a long-standing rivalry with culture) anything to do?

I am not hoping to save the institution of philosophy from empiricism; rather, my aim is to show some of the problems that arise when an empirical discipline sets out to inherit philosophy's mantle. Durkheim's formula for the sociology of religion gives us the truth-value without truth; a questionnaire theory of philosophy or literature does the same but does not try very hard to separate the predicate of being true from that of seeming true. (What seems true to everyone may have a crack at being true.) "Truth-value without truth" recalls, in more than just a punning way, I hope, Kant's famous description of aesthetic objects as exhibiting "purposiveness without a purpose." For the only judgment one can pass on such objects is an aesthetic one—disinterested, to be sure, since the "real existence of the thing represented" no longer plays a

part.¹⁶ This certainly makes much of philosophy unreadable—or makes it readable as a curious department of aesthetic experience. Imagine replacing the word “being” with some culturally bounded equivalent, say “the Greek folk-concept of Being,” in passages such as this one: “There is a science which studies Being *qua* Being. . . . This science is not the same as any of the so-called particular sciences, for none of the others contemplates Being generally *qua* Being.”¹⁷ That gives one the “alien” feeling, all right.

Yet Graham’s demonstration lives in a different fishbowl from his conclusions—and I would argue that the same holds true for any epistemology that would make “culture,” as we understand it today, the court of last appeal. Graham goes to China looking to validate or invalidate certain theses about the meaning of the (Greek) verb “to be.” His conclusion (that you can only say, and *a fortiori* mean, Being in Greek or in languages touched by the Greeks) derives from a specific kind of disappointment: the disappointment of someone who had expected Being or first philosophy to translate, to bear authority and reference beyond these terms’ (supposedly) native languages.¹⁸ For this test to take place, philosophical languages must be supposed to be, as a rule, mutually translatable, and only incidentally untranslatable, as in the present case of blockage. If, however, we do not allow that sort of reference to tempt us—if we restrict in advance the effectiveness of the signifier “Being” to this particular set of language-games—then Graham’s counterevidence will have no shock value at all; the ability to translate a word into Chinese could never validate or invalidate a particular concept. For those won over to Graham’s conclusions, his argument will have no meaning, since it is based on premises that they no longer subscribe to (namely, the premise that Being might or ought to have been translatable). In order to gain anything at all from it, they must find someone naïve enough to play the game with conviction; after a time even these will be hard to find.

Graham’s demonstration is thus a classically skeptical (i.e., destructive) one. But it’s not as if nobody is in charge. It may not have a name yet, there may not be any professorships or call numbers