ASIAN THOUGHT AND CULTURE

To Perceive and to Represent

A Comparative Study of Chinese and English Poetics of Nature Imagery

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Introduction
Comparative Literature and Comparative Theory: China and the West

When it involves the Chinese tradition, comparative literature generally takes three forms: 1) influence study, pursued mostly by those focusing on modern Chinese literature, 2) the search for rapprochement or analogies without contact, and 3) the use of Western critical theories and methodologies to (re)interpret the Chinese texts. In recent times various traps have been mapped out for each of those approaches and warning signs have been put up so that no one can afford to step into this area without some sense of where one stands and where one wants to go.

As an intercultural comparison of the poetics of nature imagery that draws on traditional Chinese poetics and English criticism from the early eighteenth century to the Romantic period, the present book belongs to the second category. In practice, Chinese-Western rapprochement studies have often been contended with enumerating affinities between otherwise unrelated authors and works. A serious problem has been, as observed by one practitioner in the field, that such comparisons are usually conducted without adequate consideration of "cultural assumptions and institutions and concrete extraliterary conditions and are therefore so inconclusive as to seem pointless." The magic lantern of mutual illumination is turning dimmer and dimmer that used to be counted on to shine indiscriminately on all exercises in juxtaposing intercultural similarities. More ambitious speculations about literary "universals," on the other hand, are invariably structured on the Western models. Consequently, "[significant] differences over time and space evaporate in the hypostasis of forms and genres," and "entire richly varied traditions become unqualified monoliths in the face-off of 'East-West' Comparative Literature" (Yu "Alienation Effects" 163).

The casualties of comparison, I may add, have been bilateral. Just as obsession with universals distorts and blurs the individualities of a cultural tradition, phobia over the collapse of boundaries blinds one to truly meaningful parallels running across cultural confinement. This is especially true of Chinese-Western comparative

literature. Those who are rightfully wary of simplifying Chinese tradition often unwittingly take a simplistic view of Western tradition in the interest of defining some unbridgeable differences. We shall have opportunity to reconsider some of those apparent differences and to demonstrate how, from a comparative perspective, the study of certain predominant theoretical assumptions in China may bring to light similar ones in the West. After all East-West comparisons are supposed to deepen our understanding of the West as well as the East.

With a clear view of the pitfalls lying ahead, my study, which centers on several major premises covering a similar area of critical concerns in two different traditions abides by two methodological principles: contextualization and dynamic comparison. The principle of contextualization enables us to examine those premises in their indigenous traditions. In scrutinizing such key literary issues as the relationship among the changes in the representation of nature in poetry, the critical response to those changes, and the emerging poetic values, we need to broaden our intellectual horizon of vision to the larger "extraliterary" terrain ranging through philosophy, religion, ethics, and psychology. Contextualization also applies in the analysis of the critical terms in which those premises are formulated and developed. As Stephen Owen points out, "in many ways a tradition of literary thought is constituted with a set words, or 'terms'" that are "part of a mutually defining system that evolves in time and has links to conceptual vocabulary in other areas of human endeavor. Not only do these terms acquire meaning by their relation to one another, each term carries a history of prior usage in particular theoretical texts, and the efficacy of each term is continually reinforced by association with particular phenomena in literary texts" (*Readings* 4–5).

The second principle, that of dynamic comparison, puts stress on the homological *evolution* of those premises in each tradition, even though we are not obliged to prove any grand thesis of historical evolution or structural aesthetics. For example, in comparing the Chinese value of the "fusion between feeling and scene" with the English Romantic ideal of the "coalescence between subject and object," I shall not stop at a static juxtaposition of relevant theoretical statements; I shall also inquire into the historical *process* through which those values evolve in each tradition so that this process itself may be explored from a comparative perspective. Similarly, the comparison of critical terms will not be conducted simply to enumerate parallels and divergences; I hope also to describe the correspondent positions which those terms occupy in the complex network of their indigenous literary thought. In a word, my study combines the synchronic and diachronic approaches. It is at once comparative poetics and comparative history of poetics.

Broadly speaking, a tradition of poetics walks on two legs. The first we may call performative poetics, embodied in the practice of the poets themselves. The second

may be described as reflective poetics, consisted of pronouncements on poetry or certain aspects of it. Inseparable as they are, those two do not always keep the same pace. Whereas from time to time I shall follow the critics as they cite and interpret specific poetic texts, my material is drawn primarily from the second category. I shall examine both "critical" interpretations of individual works or authors and "theoretical" statements of a more general kind. Those need not always be made in connection with poems that are predominantly descriptive, though comments on descriptive poetry doubtless provide an invaluable storehouse of information and ideas. I shall amble through a wide area along a historical line.

In *Chinese Theories of Literature*, James Y. Liu argues that intercultural comparative studies "will be more fruitful if conducted on the theoretical rather than practical level" and that "a comparative study of theories of literature may lead to a better understanding of all literature" (2). Liu's plea for the comparative study of critical theory still has its urgency today. This book is predicated on the belief that the comparative study of critical theory may and should serve as the groundwork of the intercultural comparative study of literature.

The very length of the Chinese tradition and the amount of relevant material make it necessary for me to focus my attention within each chapter largely, but not exclusively, on one specific historical period in Chinese, though no such restriction is applied to the English part. Chapters One to Three draw on the criticism of the Six Dynasties (222–589), Chapter Four on the Tang and Song period, and Chapters Five and Six on the Ming and Qing period. This organizational strategy is employed to achieve a balance between scope and focus.

The book is divided into three parts, with two chapters for each part. The first part of my study describes the historical emergence of the premise of immediacy to experience and the values of truthful and original imagery that lay at the core of this premise. Though it would be futile to try to pinpoint the historical moment when representation of nature in poetry became a serious critical concern in the Chinese and English traditions, there are, for my purposes, at least two reasons for choosing as convenient points of departure Zuo Si's (左思 c. 250–c. 305) plea for realism in his Preface to the "Three Capitals" (*Sandu fu* 三都賦) and the Pope-Philips quarrel over the scope and style of the pastoral. First, since the depiction of natural scenes and objects forms a prominent part in both the *fu* (賦) and the pastoral poetry, one would expect the issue of direct observation and truthful representation to emerge initially in the critical discourse on those genres. Secondly, the surrounding historical situations offer some interesting parallels. The advocates for realism in both traditions were motivated by the desire to break new ground where possibilities were deemed almost exhausted.

In the Chinese case, what I refer to specifically is the subgenre of the elaborately descriptive *fu* on metropolitan cities. Just how heavy the burden of the past was for a would-be writer may be fathomed from the fact that even Lu Ji (陸機 261–303), the dominant literary figure of Zuo Si's time, was so intimidated as to shun the descriptive *fu* on metropolitan cities and turn his creative energy to the more lyricized *fu* of much·shorter length. And Lu Ji may have been wise: the exaggerative and exhaustive mode of description seemed to allow little room for expansion after the Han masterpieces. No wonder that, upon learning of Zuo Si's intention to write the "Three Capitals," Lu Ji gloated over the prospect of using Zuo's manuscript paper to cover his wine jug. By advocating realism in opposition to what he called falsities of description in his predecessors, however, Zuo Si succeeded in positioning himself among, if not above, the illustrious rank of the Han masters and thereby managed to salvage and reinvigorate, albeit ephemerally, an admired and revered subgenre that was doomed to be a dead monument. Even Lu Ji was overwhelmed by Zuo's enormous success, which, according to Zuo's biography in the *History of Jin* (*Jin shu* 晉書), caused the price of paper to go up in the capital city Luoyang (Fang Xuanling VIII 2377).

In England, blind reverence for the classic model became increasingly paralyzing and stifling for pastoral poetry from the early eighteenth century onwards. As a result, a literary revolt was under way. From Thomas Tickell's plea for a homogenized species of the pastoral to John Aikin's psychological clairvoyance in support of such a plea, the new conception of the pastoral as describing the real and the familiar gradually triumphed over the old definition of the genre as a stylized representation of the golden age.

Chapter One treats the two above-mentioned polemical events and the resultant value of truthfulness in descriptive details. I highlight the implication of this value—which would not be so clear but from a comparative perspective—for English criticism in the context of traditional Western literary thought, which always holds in one way or another that "fiction" is the soul of poetry. In Chapter Two, I first take up propositions of the causal relation between direct observation and original imagery. Then, in the light of those propositions, a case study is offered of the controversy surrounding Coleridge's "A Hymn before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni." This is followed by an analysis of the prominently autobiographical vein in Romantic criticism to demonstrate a new convention of reading in the Romantic period which is resonant with the dominant mode of reading in traditional Chinese poetics.

The second part of my study traces the basic trajectory of the poetics of the correspondence between natural imagery and human sentiment from its theoretical gestation to its technical codification. A word of explanation is perhaps in order here

about the terms "natural imagery" and "human sentiment" as used in the present study.

The richness of the material I shall examine warns against a static conception of the term "natural imagery." To confine it to descriptions of natural landscapes and rural scenes would be to ignore the historical complexity of the poetic works to which the term is designed to apply. In the critical discourse on the *fu* in China, for example, "natural imagery" would include descriptions of such "cityscape" as palaces and imperial parks as well as landscapes like mountains and waters. Similarly, in early eighteenth century in England, no one would find it strange when John Hughes spoke in the same breath of "a Tempest, a Palace, or a Garden" as objects of "Nature" (II 329). Furthermore, for reasons that will become clear, it is neither feasible nor desirable to draw a rigid line of demarcation between images that are descriptions of natural scenes and objects actually perceived by the poet and those that are introduced primarily for the sake of comparisons. However, it is fairly safe to say that, as the poetics of correspondence developed, "natural imagery" became increasingly associated with rural scenes and wilder nature and acquires some stability as a critical term.

"Human sentiment," on the other hand, is a much more volatile concept and has a wide spectrum of meanings. In Chinese, the term may refer predominately to the moral intention of the poet in the use of nature imagery, or the statement of some reflections/emotions deduced from, or tagged to, his description of nature. In other words, it comprehends the intellectual, moral, and emotional aspects of the mind. Traditional Chinese poetics, however, does not always make such distinctions. The same can be said of the English poetics of nature imagery. A case in point is Wordsworth. As Marsh points out (130), Wordsworth "has too sound an understanding of the connection between thought and feeling" to worry over "the question of whether imaginative lines express primarily the emotions or the intellect." What may seem thoughts *and* feelings in the mind of the poet is one matrix for Wordsworth. That is why he tends to speak always of "thought and feeling and imagery" as one individual whole.

The only constant in the term "human sentiment," as opposed to "natural imagery," is the reference to the subjective domain of human thoughts and feelings. The common denominator for the otherwise different references comprehended under the term may be better defined in a negative way: insistence on it in the poetics of nature imagery points to the critical consensus about the inadequacy of descriptions of nature as such.

Though the context will make clear the individual usage of the term, a broad generalization may be made here. Historically, the critical emphasis in the Chinese tradition shifted from the morally charged authorial intention to the private emotions

of the poet. More or less the same observation can be made of English criticism from the eighteenth century to the Romantic period. Critics in the eighteenth century realized that pure description is inadequate as poetry and that "something of a more solid nature" (Aikin *Letters* 164) is needed, usually in the form of didactic instructions or general reflections, which are communicable to, and shared by, a more or less homogeneous audience. The objection of the Romantic critics to purely descriptive poetry was based on a somewhat different ground. What they stressed was the unique personal feelings of the poet as a filter, through which the external world undergoes a transformation both in his perception and in his representation of it. As a result, while the sentiments in eighteenth-century nature poetry may be criticized for being too hackneyed or impersonal, their moral validity as such was seldom in question. On the other hand, though the Romantic poet may have succeeded in making nature emotionally meaningful, the personal feelings he expressed may be open to the charge that they are too capricious or private to be of general relevance.

In Chapter Three, I first delineate the cosmological, ethical, and psychological assumptions which serve as the theoretical background, though perhaps not always the direct source, for the poetics of correspondence. The comparison of the macro-microcosmic theory as expounded by Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒 c. 179–c. 104 B.C.) with relevant remarks by such English men of letters as Thomas Browne and Phineas Fletcher forms the first section. I demonstrate how analogical cosmology remained congenial to the poetics of correspondence even as it became defunct as science as in eighteenth-century England or as it was slipping away from the center of the philosophical concern as in Six Dynasties China. I then address the theory of physico-moral analogy, as found in the Chinese notion of *bide* (比德) and in remarks by such eighteenth-century English theorists as George Cheyne, David Fordyce, and George Turnbull. My purpose here is to show how the idea of the divine analogy was absorbed into theories of human psychology. This chapter ends with a discussion of what I call the psychogenesis of poetry, articulated in the notion of the correspondence between external motion and internal emotion.

Chapter Four elucidates from a comparative perspective the technical poetics of correspondence, formulated in the precept that descriptions of nature be combined with references to man. I start with what may be called the "negative poetics" of nature imagery, i.e. the tenet that description of nature *per se* is inadequate as poetry. This critique was assimilated by technical poetics which recognized the necessity of incorporating moral statements or emotive expressions into natural description. I then describe the development of such poetics in Chinese from its inception by Wang Changling (王昌齡 698–757) to its codification in the late Southern Song. For the English part, I make extensive use of the contemporary

reviews of eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poetry. Special attention is paid to the psychological contention that descriptions of nature need to be buttressed with digressions in order to break the monotony of lengthy descriptions.

Writing of the history of philosophy, Susan Langer observed that "The way a question is asked limits and disposes the ways in which any answer to it . . . may be given." As a result, "a philosophy is characterized more by the *formation* of its problems than by its solution of them. . . . In our questions lie our *principles of analysis*, and our answers may express whatever those principles are able to yield" (3; 4). The same observation can be made of the history of literary criticism. The correlation of human sentiment with natural imagery is central to the philosophical as well as the technical poetics of nature imagery. The difference lies in the perspective from which this correlation is approached.

In the technical poetics, the key issue is the mechanics of coordinating two categories of verbal elements within the tapestry of the poetic text (i.e. expression and description). The rationale for frequently digressing from description is based on the psychology of variation. In contrast, the philosophical poetics, though often drawing on more or less the same body of poetical texts for illustration as its technical counterpart does, is primarily concerned with the process by which the poetic mind unifies and modifies its perceptions of the outside world—the process that culminates in the seamless unity between the subjective self and the objective nature. Fully explored and expounded is that faculty of the mind which is responsible for such coalescence. With the philosophical poetics, the theory of poetic perception replaces the rhetoric of poetic composition.

I use the term "philosophical" as Coleridge does when he characterizes Wordsworth as "the first and greatest philosophical poet." What Coleridge means is that Wordsworth "has effected a complete and constant synthesis of Thought and Feeling and combined them with Poetic Forms . . . and with Imagination . . . in that sense in which it is a dim analogue of creation. . ." (*Letters* II 535). I will come back to this remark for a more detailed analysis; suffice it here to point out that a "philosophical poet" as defined by Coleridge is one whose (harmonized) internal world is fused with the outside world. And the philosophical poetics is precisely concerned with the process by which this fusion takes place and with the power of the poetic mind which motivates this process.

In Chapter Five, I first present briefly the historical rise of the ideal of fusing feeling and imagery and summarize various propositions on ways of achieving this fusion. I then examine in greater detail one such proposition which I believe provides the dominant perspective in both traditions, i.e. the projective view, which attributes the unison of the inner and the outer to the projection of the former in the latter. This is followed by a discussion of the critique of the projective view. This

critique further contextualizes my comparison, in the last segment of this chapter, of the concept of *yi* (意) in Wang Fuzhi (王夫之 1619–1692) and that of imagination in Coleridge. Formulated as the unifying and modifying power of the poetic mind in its perceptions of nature, those two concepts crystallize the theory of poetic perception in the philosophical poetics of nature imagery in each tradition.

Chapter Six scrutinizes the practical criticism of several representative Chinese and English philosophical critics and highlight their interpretive strategies. An attempt is made to evaluate the success and failure of the philosophical poetics in deepening our understanding of nature imagery, especially in its (re)interpretation of certain forms of figurative language in poetry. I start with a close reading of some of Wang Fuzhi's comments in his three critical anthologies of poetry. Next I demonstrate how the Romantic concept of the imagination is rooted in traditional Western rhetoric, which has always valorized metaphors. By examining in detail how one specific form of metaphorical language—personification—is elevated in status to being the hallmark of the poetic mind, I lay bare the difference in interpretative strategies between the philosophical and the technical poetics. This chapter ends with an examination of the efforts by Wang Fuzhi and Ye Xie (葉燮 1627–1703) to transform the concept of *li* (理) and to theorize on the kind of poetic imagery which purports to transcend the pale of intellect without, however, violating the truthfulness of poetic perception.

PART I

IMMEDIACY TO EXPERIENCE

Chapter One
The Rise of the Real Scene

i. "To Celebrate What One Has Seen:"
Zuo Si's Preface to the "Three Capitals"

The relationship between the perception and representation of nature did not emerge as a major concern in Chinese criticism until the Six Dynasties period, which witnessed the growing fascination with nature in poetry. The notion, handed down from such earlier works as *The Record on Music* (*Yue ji* 樂記), the *Xunzi* (荀子) and the Major Preface to the *Classic of Poetry* (詩大序) had been that poetry (subsumed under the category of music) originates from the excitation of the mind by external things. In the Six Dynasties period, a significant change took place in this conception of the origin of poetry. Whereas external "things" had primarily referred to events and situations of the human world, they were now increasingly associated with the forms and objects of nature. Meanwhile, "the mind," rather than being considered a general faculty of humanity as in previous times, began to denote a kind of sensitivity peculiar to the poet.

This development is clearly registered in Lu Ji's presentation of the poet in his relation to nature in the "Exposition on Literature" (*Wen fu* 文賦):

> Observing the four seasons, he laments over their lapse;
> Surveying all creatures, he broods over their variety.
> He saddens over the fallen leaves in the fierce autumn;
> He rejoices at the tender buds in the fragrant spring. (762)

It should be noted, however, that Lu is defining the function of sense perceptions from the viewpoint of the "psychogenesis of poetry." Instead of being treated as the object of poetic representation, natural scenes and objects are considered primarily in terms of their capacity to induce a poetic mood. Also to be mentioned in this connection is the opening line of Lu's work, which presents the poet as "Standing in the center [of the universe] and observing with profundity." Whereas it is somewhat