



Ji-hui Wang

The Concept of Kingship in Anglo- Saxon and Medieval Chinese Literature

**A Comparative Study of
*Beowulf and Xuanhe Yishi***



**Peking University Press
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**To My Beloved Parents And My Dear Wife In
Heartiest Appreciation
And
To Professor Shaun Hughes And
My American Friends In
Grateful Remembrance**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I	INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER II	AN ANGLO-SAXON PARADIGM OF KINGSHIP	18
CHAPTER III	AN ANCIENT CHINESE PARADIGM OF KINGSHIP	52
CHAPTER IV	A DIVINELY BLESSED BATTLE LEADER WITH WISDOM; AN EXEMPLAR OF ANGLO-SAXON KINGSHIP FROM <i>BEOWULF</i>	79
CHAPTER V	A CULTIVATED SON OF HEAVEN; AN EXEMPLAR OF ANCIENT CHINESE KINGSHIP FROM <i>XUANHE YISHI</i>	125
CHAPTER VI	ROYAL BLOOD UNTAMED; LESS IMPORTANT KINGLY FIGURES IN <i>BEOWULF</i> AND <i>XUANHE YISHI</i>	163
CHAPTER VII	TOWARD A CONCLUSION	189
WORKS CITED	192
APPENDIX	ON THE DATING OF <i>BEOWULF</i>	207

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of this comparative study of *Beowulf* and *Xuanhe yishi* 《宣和遺事》 (*Proclaiming Harmony*), we cannot help but consider Matthew Arnold's 19th-century point of view on the function of literary study, which is still a basic justification for the project we would now call comparative literature. As he stated in his Inaugural Lecture at Oxford in 1857,

Every where there is connection, everywhere there is illustration. No single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures. (Quoted in Bassett 1)

His view, simply and adequately propounded, can hardly be refuted since our common sense continually reminds us of the validity of this point of view as it is reinforced in our everyday life experiences. We know through our experience of nature the importance of having a frame of reference in order to make a fair judgment of anything. For instance, we judge a tree young because we are able to form such an interpretation when we observe that tree in comparison with other trees we previously encountered, which we know to be older. Likewise, we can produce a convincing evaluation of the quality of a piece of literature only when we put it side by side with another piece, or other pieces, of literature, whether or not it is a conscious act. Since this judgmental process is a truism, our theoretical concern, and that of other comparatists as well, need to go beyond such a simplistic position.

The major difficulty in our justification of a comparative study,

therefore, lies in the explanation of the ultimate reason why we choose these two particular works, *Beowulf*, a tenth century Anglo-Saxon poem, and *Xuanhe yishi*, a thirteenth century Chinese novel, as the focus of our project. If we take the stance of the by now rather old-fashioned French school of comparatists (Paul von Tiegheem, Jean-Marie Carre, Marius François Guyard [Yip 122]), writing in the middle decade of the century, we find ourselves faced with an enormous problem. As a major effort to assure what they called "sécurité" in their comparative studies, the scholars of this school put their emphasis almost always on historical evidence which lead them to confine their studies within the limits of "interrelationship" or "influence studies" (Yip 122). Granted, it might be a nice and rather meaningful undertaking to identify a historical relationship between any two works under comparison. However, even if we neglect for a moment the serious perils inherent in the approach of these comparatists, the tremendous and often exhausting commitment of the French school to influence studies proves a death sentence to our project because, as Pauline Yu points out, the rapports demanded by these comparatists are simply non-existent so far as Chinese and Western literatures are concerned unless we are willing to limit our attention to the examination of only the Chinese literature after 1900 (162).

Hence, since *Beowulf* and *Xuanhe yishi* are not even remotely related, we seem to face what Eugene Eoyang calls a problem of "apples and oranges" (11), a colloquial parlance that has haunted legions of comparatists in their effort to bridge the West and East. Any attempt to judge an orange in terms of an apple, or an apple in terms of an orange seems methodologically absurd, especially when we are falling into the trap of a judgment, that is, according to Eoyang, founded on a premise which is not appropriately backed up by an "absolute point of reference" (11).

As a matter of fact, this reference problem, which has often resulted in biases, misinterpretations and distortions, has existed in various forms ever since the possibility of comparing the West and East in literature attracted the attention of scholars.¹ First of all, we

notice, in the practice of early comparatists, a tendency of arranging authors, texts and cultures in a hierachical order, with the Western ones always on the top. Thomas Babington Macaulay's notorious Minute addressed to Lord Bentinle, Governor-General of India of Febrary 2, 1835 is a classic example of the Eurocentric and Imperialist position in attempting to initiate the comparative study of Western and Eastern literatures. As Macauley observes:

I have never found one among them (Orientalists) who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. I have certainly never met with any Orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanscrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations. (Quoted in Bassett 17)

The working of an Eurocentric psychology in the formation of Macaulay's stance is obvious and, for the sake of politeness and humor, Bassett labels his judgment as "infamous" but with the prefix of the word parenthesized (17). This feeling of superiority on the part of Macauley and those who persisted in thinking like him inevitably hindered a reasonable understanding of anything beyond what is familiar. The lack of appropriate reference, on the other hand, also leads comparatists to strong scepticism about the possibility of comparing the literatures of the West and the East. The concern of Ulrich Weisstein, as is demonstrated by Yip in his *Tamkang Review* article, represents such kind of closedness in cultural exchange and interchange between the West and East. Our attention is drawn in this case to the warning of Weisstein, who reminds his colleagues of the possible peril if the study of parallels is extended to phenomena pertaining to two different civilizations. As he argues,

It seems to me that only within a single civilization can one find those common elements of a consciously or unconsciously upheld tradition in thought, feeling and imagination which

may, in cases of a fairly simultaneous emergence, be regarded as signifying common trends, and which, even beyond the confines of time and space, often constitute an astounding bound of unity. (Weinstein *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory* [1973]: 7, quoted in Yip 120)

Therefore, like an almost "impossible" comparison between apples and oranges, an "attempt to discover a likeness of pattern in Western and Mid- or Far-Eastern poetry" is hard to be defended (120). If the words of Weinstein which Yip describes as "depressing" stress mainly the incomprehensibility of Eastern cultures, the case of Charles Witke, as Yip also shows us, tells us more about the root of this once widely held attitude among the Western comparatists. In his article, entitled "Comparative Literature and the Classics: East and West," as is quoted by Yip, Witke has this to say:

Any group can absorb from a new group only as much as it can understand. Any new ideas can be incorporated only if the absorbing society is moving in the new group's direction in the first place. (121)

We seem to have received here a warning similar to Weinstein's. One cannot take anything that one does not understand. However, this is not an argument of any importance because it basically tells the truth. What interests us, instead, is whether or not the person wants to make himself capable of taking in what he does not understand at the moment. At this point, Witke's statement becomes significant. According to him, the solution to the problem lies in the attitude of the absorbing society towards the "new group." Without a deliberate effort to reach the new group, their literature will either be incomprehensible or, in Witke's words, "simplified or adapted into the shape of the absorber's" (121). If the latter happens, Macaulay's biased remark is nothing unexpected.

The gloomy picture we have drawn so far about the possibility of attempting to study literature comparatively between the West

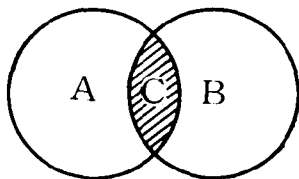
and East does not encourage us to get involved in it. However, the recent surge of interest in Western comparative studies (Yu 164) has directed comparatists to look for possible solutions to these seemingly insurmountable obstacles. To respond to the Western sense of superiority in literature, for instance, Sri Aurobindo, an committed Indian comparatist, draws our attention to the dangers of imposing one system upon another in any comparative literary project. If Indian readers took their culture as superior while evaluating the great European masterpieces, Aurobindo states, they would

dismiss the *Iliad* as a crude and empty semi-savage and primitive epos, Dante's great works as a nightmare of a cruel and superstitious religious fantasy, Shakespeare as a drunken barbarian of considerable genius with an epileptic imagination, the whole drama of Greece and Spain and England as a mass of bad ethics and violent horrors, French poetry as a succession of bald and tawdry rhetorical exercises and French fiction as a tainted and immoral thing. (*The Human Cycle* [1943]: 83, quoted in Bassett 38)

This satirical devaluation of Western literature from a hypothetical perspective of Indian readers is, of course, just as absurd as the early practice of the narrow-minded Western critics. Since the objective of comparative literature is to open up wider vistas by asking for mutual adjustments and mutual absorption on the part of each culture (Yip 121), we should first of all solve our methodological problem so as to break out of our cultural confines.

So far as the possibility of comparing the literature of the West and the East is concerned, comparatists have made considerable effort to pave the way to reach out to each other. In order to get outside of the limitations of one's model and point of view, as Yip suggests, in his article "The Use of 'Models' in East-West Comparative Literature," it is important for comparatists to obtain the essentials, the "universality" as they are called, shared by their own

model and by that of their target culture (114). To illustrate his contention, Yip draws two circles partly overlapping each other as is shown below:



With Circle A and Circle B representing respectively the two models in a comparative project, the overlapping (shaded) part, C, represents, between the two models, the resemblances which, in his scheme, will be the base for establishing a fundamental model for comparison. In C are to be found the fundamental universals that will justify a comparative effort between the two seemingly unrelated parties. Yet, to know their resemblances is not our ultimate purpose even though they help establish the basis for a beginning for analysis and help put the whole comparative process on an equal footing. Instead, in order to see more clearly the strength and weakness of either of the models, as Yip observes, the unoverlapped parts, the parts representing the divergences, will be most instructive and revealing if they are treated with mutual respect, because they can "bring us closer to the root understanding of the two models than the resemblances" (119).

We have more or less the same resolution of the problem in Eugene Eoyang's article "Polar Paradigms in Poetics," even though he stresses more the importance of multiplicity of perspectives in the comparison of the literature of the West and the East. Eoyang suggests that a multiple perspective can be achieved if a comparatist would adopt polar points of reference, "polar" because they are not "categorical opposites" which are mutually exclusive. As the author believes, the virtues and the limitations of both traditions should become more apparent in any comparison if this multiple perspective is used, a perspective which is not culturally bound and, therefore,

enables a comparatist to observe and judge with a fair point of reference. Against the background of a different context if it is not examined with oversimplification and bias, a comparatist could truly discover and appreciate his own heritage (Eoyang 20).

With Yip's and Eoyang's views in mind, we should not have much difficulty to get rid of the haunting charge of taking up a critical position which compares "oranges and apples." In fact, if we take an orange and an apple as an analogy for our comparison of *Beowulf* and *Xuanhe yishi*, we, as orange lovers, are not trying to degrade the apple because it does not look like the orange. Rather, we take both of them first and foremost as potentially good fruits although different in species, and we choose to analyze their divergences in terms of both taste and nutritive values. On the basis of this comparative analysis, we see in what way we can benefit by making a good use of both according to our sufficient knowledge of them, if we are not able to create a new and better species.

As our judgment of the orange and the apple is based on our knowledge of their respective nutritive value and taste rather than their looks, attractive as they are in appearance, our comparison of two pieces of literature can possibly be based either on a consideration of aesthetics or on a consideration of thematics. However, if we glance over the works of comparative literature, especially the studies comparing the Western and Chinese literatures, we will be surprised about how little work has been done on something other than studies of form, genre and some other aesthetic topics. It seems to be a trend of scholarship in the field, Western and Chinese, to consider aesthetics as the major issue for comparatists in attempting to cross cultural boundaries in their enterprise of comparing Western and Chinese literary works. Even if these studies occasionally pay some attention to the interplay of literature and its sociopolitical circumstances, they seem too weak to be freed from the aesthetic fads of the discipline.² Pauline Yu, for instance, is convinced that there is much to learn from critical examinations of the situation of literature in premodern China which, in her words, takes "inspiration from the recent surge of interest in the West in comparative studies

of discourse and society, literary history and literary institutions" (163). She also acknowledges the appropriateness of sociopolitical approaches in the discussion of Western and Chinese literatures because she knows that "the intergral relationship between letters and the sociopolitical order has long been taken for granted in China" (163). Nevertheless, as she moves her discussion to the Western lyric and the Chinese Shi 詩 (a form of poetry), she says all the same:

Valid comparisons involving any literature must begin with an adequate knowledge of the norms, conventions, and rules within which it was produced. (175)

We are not suggesting here any doubt about the legitimacy of aesthetic discussions,³ but drawing attention to the negligence on the part of comparatists about other critical issues such as the consideration of themes arising from similar social and political conditions which may be discerned in the two traditions.

As a matter of fact, the relevance of interdisciplinary study in literature has long been discussed and has drawn the attention of comparatists to the issue. Aldo Scaglione's article "Comparative Literature as Cultural History," for instance, reminds us of the host of pluralistic approaches "envisaging a great deal of latitude for the nonliterary ingredients of literary evaluation, ranging from psychology/ psychoanalysis to more or less Marxist economism and sociology" (148). By going outside literature and "literariness" proper, according to Scaglione, we are able to reestablish the necessary foundation for a holistic consideration of the real historical circumstances and conditions of artistic creation so as to understand fully the piece of literature, which is a "structured record of an individual consciousness" (148) as is proposed by critics of the so-called Geneva school.⁴

If the mentality behind the work is crucial in our effort to understand a particular piece of literature, the sociopolitical surroundings of authors should especially be an indispensable focal point of

any comparative study because the great and, in most cases, unavoidable difference in location and time between the circumstances of the two literary works has already created a great deal of difficulty in helping us come to an appropriate understanding of them. It seems that if the two works under comparison are from more or less the same stage in the development of human society, with similar sociopolitical backgrounds,⁵ the project would be more meaningful, because we can more easily identify the specific characteristics of either of the two works as they are likely to be formulated under similar circumstances.

Having developed a theoretical understanding of the pitfalls of comparing Western and Chinese literature, I plunged myself, boldly but not blindly, into the work of comparing medieval English literature with Chinese literature of the Song dynasty. My first serious project was the 1988 Master's thesis which grew out of a term paper on the same topic written in a course on Middle English literature. It was, to the best of my knowledge, the first comparative study of the Middle English lyric and Song Ci 词 (a lyric form which flourished during the Song dynasty), the themes of which are closely examined against their respective sociopolitical settings.

The current book grew out of my Ph. D. dissertation completed in May, 1994 and the choice of my dissertation topic was not as easy as that of the Master's thesis. Owing to my deep-rooted belief in the intimate relationship between literature and society, I was tempted to engage in an exploration of some thematic concerns of *Beowulf* as a reflection of the late Anglo-Saxon sociopolitical situations. However, after several attempts to get a manageable research topic in Old English literature, I was finally convinced that a comparative study of *Beowulf* with some Chinese text of more or less the same time period would be more suitable and more meaningful to me and would continue the work I had begun in my Master's thesis. After some thought and discussion, I decided to work on the concept of kingship, since it was one of the important issues in *Beowulf* that I found particularly interesting. However, the search for a Chinese counterpart gave me something of a headache. On a

rather cold winter morning, I was sitting with Professor Hughes, my major professor, around a dining table in the noisy Union cafeteria, sipping hot coffee while pondering on the suitability of using *Shuihu zhuan* 《水浒传》 (*Water Margin*) as a possible choice from the canon of Chinese literature in the Song period to study in comparison with *Beowulf*. Although the two works were generically different, one in verse while the other in prose, both are of epic-like nature. In terms of their thematic concerns, *Shuihu zhuan* was also somewhat comparable to *Beowulf*, for, like the Old English poem, it dealt with, besides other things, medieval heroism, power, as well as leadership. If there had been no better alternatives, these two works might have made a fairly good pair for comparison.

Yet, the emphasis of this 12th-century Chinese novel upon the theme of rebellion in peasant uprising kept bothering me, so much so that I doubted whether I would be able to surmount the potential theoretical difficulties within the limited period of time available. With hesitation and scepticism I left Professor Hughes, wondering for the whole gloomy afternoon whether I could find a better Chinese work of the same period. In due course, I finally set my mind upon *Xuanhe yishi*, one of the earliest Chinese novels of oral tradition written down some two hundred years later than *Beowulf*, dealing specifically with the theme of kingship.

In comparing the two works against their respective sociopolitical backgrounds, we find that medieval texts from various cultural traditions, whether they are historical or literary, seem to share the same thematic interest in the concept of kingship. This interest is well exemplified by the evidence found in both historical documents and such literary works as the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and the medieval Chinese *Xuanhe yishi*. As this comparative study attempts to demonstrate, despite the differences of culture and time, this particularly medieval political concern was addressed and highlighted in significantly similar ways in these two generically different kinds of works.

Although modern researchers, historians in particular, have made a conscious effort to shift the focus of their studies away from

the functions of the monarchy to those of the common people in the process of social development, the decisive role of individual rulers in determining the fate of a people cannot be easily denied. The disgust for the bad, the contempt for the weak, and the longing for the virtuous monarch enjoy the status of a shared thematic focus, the appeal of which transcends the barriers of culture and time. The discussion of kingship, the praise and condemnation of it, in a profusion of literary works, have significantly contributed to our understanding of the otherwise rather abstract conceptions of theologians, historians and political scientists. In the latter works, the concept of kingship is usually presented in an idealized and abstract form, developing, in effect, an ideology of kingship. But it is in those works which can be considered "literary" that the ideology of kingship is seen in action against a backdrop of political, social, and other pragmatic concerns which put the efficaciousness of the ideology to the test.

Even so, owing to the social, political and sometimes cultural limitations of the writer of a "literary" work, the images of individual monarchs that these works produce are frequently blurred by an emotionally idealized depiction drawn from the ideology of kingship, which presents at best the modification, if not total distortion, of a given historical situation. A credulous reading that takes these accounts at face value will certainly lead to a hopeless misjudgment of a particular historical episode. Nevertheless, our situation in the study of historical concepts such as that of kingship is not that overwhelming. Between the lines of the surviving records, historical or literary, if we are attentive enough, we can without much effort detect the actual problems the kings of various times and cultures faced. This is especially true in a consideration of "popular" literature, which often verifies the conclusions we have been able to derive from "official" histories, chronicles and the like. The comparative examination of two literary works, one from tenth-century England and the other from twelfth-century China against their respective ideological traditions, supported by the surviving historical traditions of each society, will further prove the validity of the often