

COMPARISON OF CHINESE AND WESTERN LITERATURE

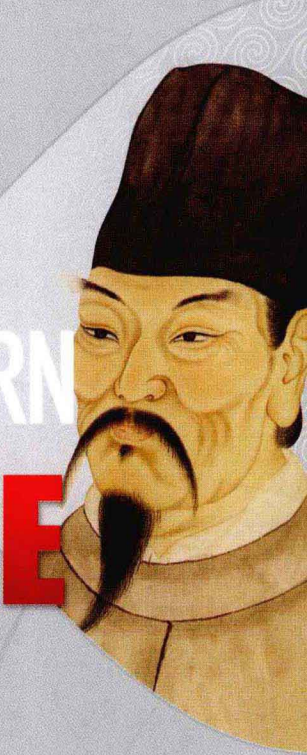
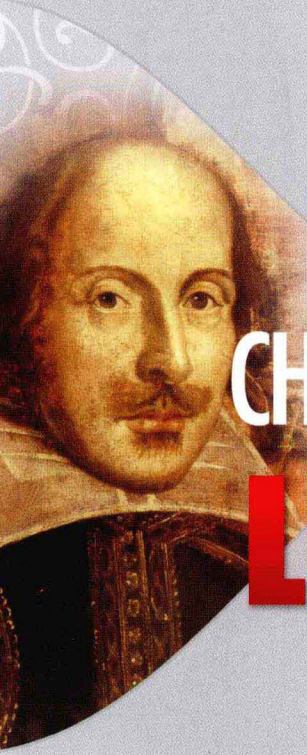
Compiled by
Li Qingben
Cui Lianrui



TWO friends there were that did their journey take,
And by the way, they made a vow to either,
What ere befall, they never would forsake.

CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

By chance they met, a great and ugly bear,
At whose amazed with a deadly stare,



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图书在版编目(CIP)数据:

中西文学比较: 英文 / 李庆本, 崔连瑞著; 许华锋等译. —北京:
五洲传播出版社, 2008.9
ISBN 978-7-5085-1454-3

I. 中… II. ①李…②崔…③许… III. 比较文学—文学研究—
中国、西方国家—英文 IV. I0-03
中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2008) 第 154688 号

中西文化比较丛书:

总顾问: 王 晨
总策划: 李 冰
总监制: 郭长建
出版人: 李向平
主 编: 吴 伟

中西文学比较 (英文版)

撰 稿: 李庆本 崔连瑞
图片提供: C F P
责任编辑: 许冬梅
翻 译: 许华锋 王若男
装帧设计: 缪 惟 林国霞
出版发行: 五洲传播出版社
社 址: 北京市海淀区莲花池东路北小马厂 6 号华天大厦
邮政编码: 100038
电 话: 010-58891281
传 真: 010-58891281
制版单位: 北京锦绣圣艺文化发展有限公司
印 刷: 北京嘉彩印刷有限公司
开 本: 787 × 1092 1/16
印 张: 9
印 数: 3000
版 次: 2008 年 9 月第 1 版 2008 年 9 月第 1 次印刷
定 价: 88.00 元

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Preface

Literature, in a strict sense, refers to “the art of beauty” or “the art of language”, including poetry, prose, drama, fiction, etc. However, the concept “literature” has gone through a complicated process of evolution in the course of history before it develops the meaning we usually refer to today.

In China, the word “文学”(literature) first appeared in *The Analects of Confucius*. *The Analects of Confucius*, Part-11 quotes the master as saying:

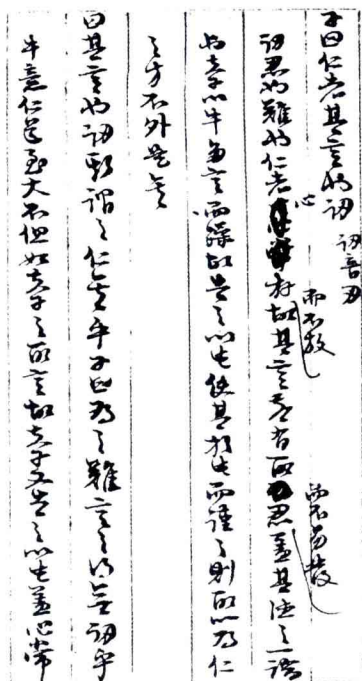
德行：颜渊，闵子骞，冉伯牛，仲弓。

言语：宰我，子贡。

政事：冉有，季路。

文学：子游，子夏。

The translation reads: the students of Confucius had various abilities. The ones virtuous in principles and conduct were Yan-Yuan, Min Ziqian, Ran Boniu and Zhong’gong. The ones who were good in rhetoric were Zai’wo and Zi’gong. The ones who had administrative talents were Ran’you and Ji’lu. The ones familiar with the ancient literature were Zi’you and Zi’xia. Here, “literature” refers generally to ancient classic literature, not including language and art works that have special aesthetic features involving the manifold factors of emotion, imagination and fabrication. The special aesthetic nature of literature at the time was the function of poetry. Confucius says, “The poetry serve to stimulate the mind. They may be used



Incomplete copy of the *Collected Notes on The Analects* by Zhu Xi of the Southern Song Dynasty

for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment.” And “It is by poetry that the mind is aroused. It is by the Rules of Propriety that the character is established. It is from Music that the finish is received.” This means that although poetry bears its social function as part of general culture, it has special features different to other forms of culture, which is its unique evocative appeal. Before the 18th century, the word literature in the West was often used to denote general culture. In ancient Greece there was no general concept of literature, only specific genres such as epic, eulogy, rhetoric and drama.

In the English-speaking world, the word “literature” was introduced from Latin *litteratura* and *litteralise* in the 14th century. Whether China or the West, the concept of literature was originally generalized and cultural, not separated from other cultural forms as history, philosophy, and rhetoric, not yet developed its clear, independent and special aesthetic feature. It was not until China's Wei and Jin periods (3rd – 6th century) and in the West in the 18th century that the situation was changed. In the 5th century AD, emperor Wen of the Song dynasty established the “Four Schools” thereby officially separating “literature” from “Confucianism”, “Metaphysics” and “History”, the aesthetic nature of literature was formally recognized. In the West, since the rise of

Enlightenment and Romanticism of the 18th century, the idea of literature as a study of special aesthetic nature was gradually acknowledged.

From another perspective, though essentially different from general culture, literature is often linked to other forms of culture, and is subject to influences of different ethnic cultures (language, history, philosophy, religion, arts, customs, national character, etc) which lead to the development of literatures of different ethnic and national characteristics. From the perspective of a comparative study of Chinese and Western literature, Chinese literature, generally speaking, tends to give expression to emotion; Western literature is good on narrative representation, which is a result of the difference of the two cultures. Chinese lyrical literature has developed to its advantages in the sense that narrative style has become the expertise of Western literature. Of course, such generalization focuses on the overall characteristics of literary style, it does not mean that China has no narrative literature or there is no lyric in the West. Different characteristics of Chinese and Western literature are bound to have specific manifestations in literary genres as poetry, prose, drama, fiction, etc.

Chapter I : Rhythmic Subtlety Vs Metrical Inspiration

——Comparison of Chinese and Western Poetry

Poetry is the expression of gallant and free or delicate and subtle feelings with very concise words. Some poems record the development of major events in the history of mankind, while some verse may be the lighthearted singing of an individual's passion. Since ancient times, poetry has appeared when it is needed, whether in the 5,000 years of splendid Chinese civilization, or in the long history of the West. The origins of human civilization are intimately related to mankind's struggle to gain sustenance. In the course of such activities, people would freely express their views without having to rely on written records, making poetry one of the oldest of all literary genres. Lu Xun once said in his work *"The Outsider Talks"* that the laborer's chant of "hai jyou, hai jyou" was the earliest known poetry and humorously called it the "hai jyou, hai jyou" style. The origin of poetry was also closely related to religion and entertainment. However, there were differences in the origins of Chinese and western civilizations, in geography, religion, totem worship

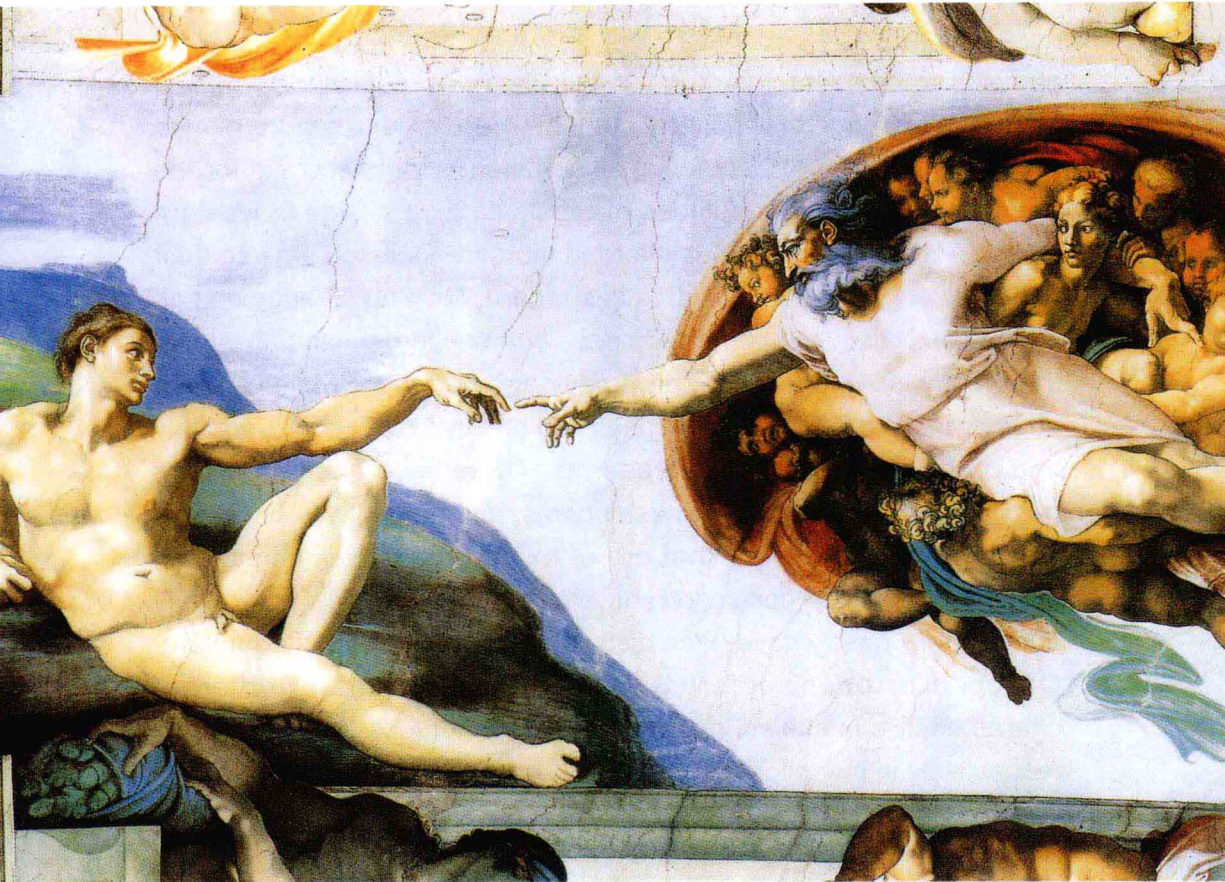
and customs, these factors have led to dissimilar features in Chinese and western poetry.

It is too arbitrary to define the melody of Chinese poetry as subtle and that of the West as bold and unrestrained, but difference does exist between Chinese and Western poetry in strength and momentum of emotional expression. Geographically, China is a continental country; Western countries such as Greece, Britain, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, etc, are all marine countries. Qian Mu said in his *Introduction to Chinese Cultural History* that “dissimilarity in cultural spirits can be traced to the root of natural environment which impacts on the way of life and in turn impacts on the spirit of culture.”^① Mr. Qian believed that Chinese culture is a typical continental farming culture, Western cultures are authentic coastal/commercial cultures. As a continental farming culture, Chinese civilization is characteristic of self-sufficiency, less seeking outside its



Qian Mu, a contemporary Chinese historian and master of Chinese culture.

boundary, relatively stable and conservative. Few poems fashioned under this environment have been full of adventurous passion or given to direct expression. Western nomadic, marine-cultures, on the other hand, have been distinctively more seeking and explorative with no shortage of accounts of adventures and ocean expeditions, which exciting experiences should make it easier for direct expression of feelings and make life less monotonous as in the case of the Chinese. Secondly, from the point of view



Creation of Adam by Michelangelo, fresco at Sistine Chapel in Vatican City

of social development, China entered an extended period of feudal rule after a relatively short-term slave-holding society. Under the high-pressure of feudal rule and the traditional views that “the minister should kneel to the emperor, the son to the father and the wife to the husband”, officials and scholars of China, whether in office or not, did not dare to express their views and aspirations. Rather, they would make use of euphemism and couch their opinions or ideas in ambiguous literature. Therefore, it can be said that ancient Chinese poets have perfected the art of subtlety and delicacy in their poems by hiding their ideological edge due to concerns over own safety as well as the desire to placate

and please the rulers. Feudalism in the West was much shorter in time span and the degree of political centralization far less severe than in China; the relatively open social environment should account for the openness and resourcefulness of emotional expression in western poetry. Poets have been thus afforded more freedom to immerse their poems in streams of emotion. In this regard, Mr. Zhu Guangqian has done an excellent summary of Chinese and Western poetry: "Poetry of the West wins in openness, profundity and narration; while Chinese poetry wins in subtlety, gracefulness and brevity." ② Of course, subtlety and openness are only relative terms. There have been no lack of passionate lines in some Chinese poems, and among western poetry you can also find verses that are of expression of gentleness and delicacy. Overall, Chinese poetry have been more of a beauty of subtlety and western poetry have been distinctively of an unrestrained nature. Couched or open, different style creates poems of different characteristics in subject matter, forms and methods to be examined respectively in the following sections.

SECTION I. SECULAR SONGS VS RELIGIOUS HYMN: DIFFERENCE IN SUBJECT MATTER

Influences of Religion or the Lack of It on Chinese and Occidental Poetry

Civilization, since its dawn, has been inextricably linked with religion. In ancient times, science and technology was hardly an option of recourse for people encountering obstacles in farming, herding and maritime adventure; besides exerting themselves as best as they could, they would pray to a god of supernatural force to help them weathering a disaster or to be blessed a safe ride or to subdue ghosts and devils. In addition to Taoism originated in the country, Chinese have accepted foreign religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Catholicism. However, religious ideology has never been strong in Chinese poetry, for many reasons; mainly because after the reunification of the Western Han Dynasty, the ruling ideology was Confucianism at the expense of all the other schools of thought, the so-called “to oust the hundred schools, and to teach Confucianism only” policy. The core of Confucianism, also the legislation principle, was the idea of “to be kind to your kin, and to respect your superior”, giving great weight to “the rule of man” and to “living the worldly life.” These ideas made people from top-down believe in achievements and convinced of the inevitability of their involvement in the hustle bustle of secular life, hard working, without pinning their hopes on the possibility of a vague and illusory afterlife. Therefore, Chinese poetry, no matter what kind of