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CECILE CHU-CHIN SUN

Problems of Perspective in Chinese-Western Comparative Literature Studies*

A little over thirty years ago, the Comparative Literature group of the Modern Language Association – thanks to the vision and effort of Professors Frenz and Anderson – held a Conference on Oriental-Western Literatures and Cultural Relations at Indiana University.¹ The main purpose of that Conference was to bring together scholars of both Oriental and Western literatures to begin meaningful exchange on American campuses for their mutual benefit. It was felt that the time was ripe for American universities to include in their curricula more teaching and research about Oriental literatures in a comparative context.

That Conference was certainly a significant landmark in the history of East-West literary studies. For, before then, Oriental literatures were practically *terrae incognitae* in the Eurocentric discipline of comparative literature.² Today, many important events have occurred since that Conference. In the field of Chinese-Western comparative literature, there has been a steady growth both in scholarly publications, academic programs, and in the number of special conferences held, not only in the United States, but in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China.

At the First International Comparative Literature Conference held in Taiwan (1971), Professor Claudio Guillén of Harvard University

* This is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the Ninth Triennial Meeting of the ACLA (March 19-22, 1986), University of Michigan.

1 See the Introduction to *Oriental-Western Literary Relations*, ed. Horst Frenz and G.L. Anderson. The University of North Carolina Studies in Comparative Literature No. 13 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1955) ix-xiii.

2 For a succinct review of Eurocentrism in the history of comparative literature, see the informative and provocative article by Ulrich Weisstein, 'D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous? The Permanent Crisis of Comparative Literature,' *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 9, ii (June 1984) 167-92 (especially 175-7).

made a memorable remark in reference to the special role of East-West comparative literature studies:

Today the consideration of poetic theory with regard to both Eastern and Western writing – to civilizations between which no genetic relations have existed – is a central *desideratum* of comparative literature studies. But what single student of poetry can entertain these ambitions? Indeed, what single literature or culture can justify them? Nothing seems more useful, in this context, than the mutual questioning of fellow researchers.³

Guillén's words are a far cry from the earlier concept of what comparative literature was all about. Implicit in his remark is the notion that comparative literature as a discipline has evolved from its earlier preoccupation with *rapports de fait* between related literatures to an increasing concern with literary theory relevant to *all* literatures.

By pointing out the important role of Oriental literatures in the context of comparative literature, Guillén has simultaneously identified the most crucial and formidable problem inherent in the study of East-West comparative literature. In fact, the contribution Eastern literatures can make in this regard depends precisely on how East-West comparatists recognize their unique role and all the relevant methodological implications.

The steady growth in Chinese-Western comparative literature studies, however, has not usually been directed by such a recognition. So many of these studies, unfortunately, have been characterized by a fuzziness about their proper role and their ultimate purpose. Such fuzziness is, in fact, largely responsible for the conspicuous absence of well thought-out theories and methodologies specifically suited to Chinese-Western comparative literature studies. For many contemporary comparatists, to compare, more often than not, means to pair off a Chinese literary work with a certain Western work on the specious grounds of their surface similarities, or to apply a given Western methodology or theory to a Chinese work. The notion of finding a valid and solid basis for the objects of comparison, so as to allow both similarities and differences to emerge, has not been sufficiently attended to. During the past twenty years or so, there have been two common types of Chinese-Western comparative literature writings which seem

to have been written without much recognition as to: 1) what comparative literature is about and 2) the unique role of Chinese-Western comparative literature in the field. This failure to identify clearly the relevance of Chinese literature in the overall context of comparative literature is, essentially, a problem of perspective.

The first type of perspective is what I would describe as the *myopic* school of comparison. It is characterized by an over-emphasis on surface and random aspects of the works compared. The cultural contexts and literary conventions are seldom taken into account, in order to render the similarities tenable. The main purpose of this type of comparison is to claim that, after all, Chinese literature is not all that different from Western literatures.

The second type, on the contrary, is caused by a quite different problem in perspective. Instead of looking at the surface phenomenon of the literary works in a piecemeal fashion, its primary purpose is to apply Western theories and methodologies, particularly those of the structuralist and post-structuralist persuasions, to Chinese literature, often in a wholesale fashion. In contradistinction to the myopic comparison, I call the second type, the *hypermetropic* school, not so much for its tendency to see a remote literature better, but because of its preference for critical theories from the distant West, as if they were ways of approaching Chinese literature. In this case of defective 'farsightedness,' the problem of perspective is twofold: 1) shifting the focus from comparing literatures to applying literary theories, and 2) looking almost exclusively to the West for the critical tools to study Chinese literature.

MYOPIC COMPARISON

Many examples of myopic comparisons can be found in studies of Chinese and English poetry under the general rubric of Chinese nature poetry and English Romantic poetry. It seems so natural to associate the Romantic mode with Chinese poetry, since both are well known for culling scenes, so to speak, from the natural world. 'Wordsworth, of our poets, comes closest to the Chinese,' an American translator of Chinese poetry has noted, 'but their poetry cleaves even nearer to nature than his.'⁴

3 Claudio Guillén, 'Some Observations on Parallel Poetic Forms,' *Tamkang Review* 2, ii-iii, 1 (October 1971, April 1971) 395

4 Witter Byrner, Introduction to *The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology*, in *The Chinese Translations: The Works of Witter Byrner*, ed. James Kraft (New York: Farrar 1978) 42

But this sense of affinity which many Chinese and Westerners feel, cannot go unchallenged when specimens of Chinese poetry are compared more in-depth with English Romantic poems. T'ao Yuan-ming (A.D. 365-427), Wang Wei (A.D. 701-761), or Meng Hao-jan (A.D. 686-c. 740), for example, have often been compared with Wordsworth. On the surface, it seems that there is a good deal in common between the English poet and his alleged Chinese counterparts. Yet, on closer examination, we soon realize that the egotistical sublime which stamps practically all of Wordsworth's poems – despite his yearning for a kind of wise passiveness – contrasts sharply with the so-called *ch'ung-tan* style shared by T'ao Yuan-ming, Wang Wei and Meng Hao-jan. It is a style characterized by a self-effactive calmness in one's encounter with nature.

Probing a bit deeper, we realize that this stylistic contrast is, in fact, a reflection of differing attitudes towards external reality. Wordsworth, despite his Romantic emphasis on the power of imagination as a mediator between himself and nature, nevertheless tends to impose himself on nature and, like Coleridge, can only receive from nature what he gives to it. The Chinese poets, on the other hand, tend to let nature be, and view themselves as an insignificant part of nature. The Romantic anxiety, resulting largely from the immense gulf between the subjective ego and the stubborn independence of objective reality, is practically non-existent among Chinese poets.

This initial examination already indicates very clearly that the Wordsworth-and-T'ao Yuan-ming or Wordsworth-and-Wang Wei type of pairing is misleading. Furthermore, to compare Chinese poems with English Romantic poems just because there are images of nature in both is actually comparing a typical Chinese poetic method with a typical English poetic theme.⁵ This kind of comparison – where issues are mixed and confused – usually lead us into a dead-end.

I am not suggesting that comparison has to be based on similarities. Quite the contrary. Contrastive studies between unrelated literatures can be very illuminating. What I do object to, however, is the use of vague notions such as 'cleaving to nature' as a basis for comparison. This kind of flimsy construction will certainly show signs of crumbling when we examine its foundation.

5 For a detailed discussion of the subject, see my *Sense of Scene: Depictions of Scene as Expressions of Feeling in Chinese and English Poetry*. Diss. Indiana University 1982 (Ann Arbor: UMI 1983).

Indeed, the problem of locating a viable basis for valid comparison is, perhaps, the most challenging job in comparing historically or genetically unrelated literatures. The extent and degree of this difficulty may not be entirely appreciated by comparatists operating within the more homogeneous tradition of Western culture. Generally speaking, this is because literatures within the same tradition naturally share a common stock of cultural and linguistic conventions, to say nothing of epistemological and broadly philosophical orientations.

In the above familiar example of the Wordsworth-and-Wang Wei comparison, we have already seen some indications of how difficult it is to establish a viable basis for comparison. To elaborate a bit further, what frequently happens in Chinese-Western comparative literature studies is something like this: the author of the investigation begins with a few random similarities which might have first inspired the comparison and, at the end of the paper – presto! – we are given an affirmation of the author's initial mere inkings, often masquerading as portentous conclusions, about some so-called points of convergence.

This may sound unbelievably naive. Yet, unfortunately, it seems to be a general pattern followed by many comparatists who are interested in paralleling Chinese works or writers with their alleged counterparts in the West. Although the main problem with these comparative studies is that they frequently limit their focus to facile points of similarity without taking into account the broad cultural dimension of the works,⁶ yet they are usually directed by a fairly clear interest in the works under comparison.

Another variation of the myopic approach which has, perhaps, even more serious implications than what we have been describing above, occurs when a writer attempts to expand the already shaky premise about individual works or writers into a grand comparison that involves an entire literary period or movement. Furthermore, what often happens is that a Western period or movement which is regarded as some kind of universalist norm, is used to measure the relative conformity of the works in question.

In a study on Li Ho and Keats, for example, a comparatist, without ostensibly using the notion of period or movement as a guiding principle of comparison has, however, made insinuations which point in

6 See, e.g., David Ying Chen's *Li Ho and Keats: A Comparative Study of the Two Poets*. Diss. Indiana University 1962 (Ann Arbor: UMI 1963).

that direction. In the following concluding remark about the two poets, he says:

Each of them, with his rare combination of classicism and romanticism, with his selective acceptance of and unhesitating revolt against tradition, and with his skillfully blended realistic and symbolic technique, stands proudly in the forefront of the poetic movement of his time.⁷

Although the author is careful enough not to capitalize either classicism or romanticism, we might still ask: What classicism? What romanticism? Is there a Chinese brand of classicism or romanticism comparable to that of Western Classicism or Romanticism? If so, on what basis are they comparable? The point is: Considering the complexity and controversy surrounding questions of periodization, is it appropriate at all to apply a Western period or movement label so uncritically to Chinese literature? Such an incongruous notion should not be allowed to continue unchallenged. This indiscriminate acceptance of a Western period or movement title for Chinese literature would be just as misleading as referring to British Neoclassicism by a traditional Chinese label, *Fu-ku* (literally, Revival of Ancient [Literatures]) Movement.

Similar attempts at cultural crossovers take place when comparatists attach a Western period or movement name to a given type of Chinese writing in order to highlight certain characteristics of the latter which are believed to be difficult to pinpoint otherwise. In an otherwise well documented paper, 'Towards Defining Chinese Baroque Poetry',⁸ the author speaks of the advantage of using a Western period title for Li Ho and other authors of the Mid-Late T'ang period, as follows:

In conclusion, despite the fact that the use of the term *Baroque* in Chinese literary studies to date needs more critical perspective and analysis, the Baroque period concept from Western literary criticism, if properly introduced should be illuminating for Chinese literary historians... Although it is obvious that no serious literary historians would adopt one or two foreign terms without restructuring the periods and masquerading the "age-spirit" of a national literature, the attempt at defining the traditionally-called Mid-Late T'ang period in terms of Baroque Stylistics will serve as an impetus for establishing Chinese

literary periods, using period style as an underlying principle for writing literary history and as an index to the spirit of an age.⁹

Although the author wisely qualifies his remarks, many questions can still be asked about the rationale behind this kind of labeling of a literary period. I wish to question one crucial aspect: Is it really useful to impose a period term – which is heavily cultural-bound – from one tradition onto another, when the term in question has not yet received universal acceptance in the source tradition? To be sure, there are many qualities about Li Ho and other Mid-Late T'ang poets which may be in some ways strikingly similar to certain Baroque poets in the West, especially if viewed in isolation from a host of other literary, historical, and social factors. But these similarities alone do not justify calling Li Ho a Baroque poet. Such a critical practice would be just as inappropriate and uninformative as referring to the Cavalier poet, Robert Herrick, by the Chinese appellation, *Hua-chien* poet.¹⁰

Here, a fine yet important distinction has to be made between *being* a Baroque poet and *being like* a Baroque poet. Li Ho is certainly not a Baroque poet, although he may be in some ways like a Baroque poet. A writer using poetic language may be allowed the license to blur the distinction between a metaphor and a simile; a literary historian, however, is seldom given the same luxury. To call Li Ho a Baroque poet is to lift him out of the cultural environs of the T'ang period and place him in a seventeenth-century European context. Can this kind of trans-labeling be 'properly introduced' and how can it be 'illuminating for the Chinese literary historians' who are more likely to be offended by what they might justifiably consider a form of literary colonization?

In addition, what further complicates the matter is the fact that a given writer or work may be identified by different and even mutually exclusive labels. Li Ho, for example, has been referred to as a Romantic as well as a Baroque poet; Wang Wei, as a nature poet, a landscape

9 Wong, 62. Also worth consulting in this regard is James J.Y. Liu, *The Poetry of Li Shang-yin: Ninth-Century Baroque Chinese Poet* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1969). See pp. 253-6 for Liu's rather unconvincing justification for the use of the term 'baroque' in his sub-title.

10 The *Hua-chien* poets were named after the anthology, *Hua-chien Chi*, edited by Chao Ch'ung-tso in the year 940. It is a collection of a type of poem called, *tz'u*, chiefly about love and characterized by sensuous imagery and vivid descriptions of life at the court or in the pleasure quarters.

7 Chen, 177

8 Wong Tak-wai, *Tamkang Review* 8, 1 (April 1977) 25-72

poet, a Romantic poet, and even a Symbolist poet! To be sure, different comparatists may emphasize different aspects of the same poet, but such confusion of labeling all the more reveals the fundamental inadequacy of imposing a term derived from a foreign period or movement onto the native writers of another culture. This fundamental inadequacy once again calls our attention to the fact that we are comparing literatures which are largely unrelated historically and genetically; between such literatures, culturally-bound notions of a specific period or movement cannot really be borrowed or equated without serious distortion of the recipient literature.

Whatever faults these kinds of comparison may have, they are at least generated by the comparatist's aesthetic response to the works concerned. Judging by the publications on comparative literature which have been steadily pouring out of China in recent years, there is another kind of myopic comparison which warrants our attention. A rather simple formula characterizes many of these comparative studies: isolated examples from Chinese and Western literary works are singled out for comparison. For example, either a character, a scene, or even just a few lines from a Chinese novel, or drama, or a poem are juxtaposed to an alleged Western (often including, to be sure, a Russian) counterpart. The study usually emphasizes how strikingly similar the works under comparison are despite their differences in time, distance, and cultural context. The reason for such uncanny similarities in the works compared is often found in their similar social contexts: often the struggle of the oppressed underdog in a feudal society. Karl Marx is frequently invoked as a latter-day *deus ex machina* to rescue the writers out of any critical dilemmas they may have gotten themselves into. The study ends with a statement that the peoples' response to the injustice of oppressive feudal society is perennially the same all over the world. Literature is thus regarded as the best mirror to reflect such common phenomena. Consequently, comparative literature is considered one of the best means of documenting and reinforcing the deterministically patterned behavior of peoples in all ages.

These studies are myopic in that they, too, are primarily inspired by the surface and random similarities of the works compared. Hence, two recent articles printed in China publications suggest that shrewd women characters like Wang Hsi-feng in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*¹¹ or two ill-fated lovers like

Chang Sheng and Ts'ui Ying-ying in *The Dream of the West Chamber* and Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare's play,¹² are all comparable pairs from a socialistic point of view.

In a recent survey on the current development of comparative literature studies in China, the author, himself a Chinese, has called attention to this common phenomenon and, like most of his colleagues, classifies such comparisons as 'parallel studies.'¹³ Writing in an English comparative literature journal published in China, he points out the dangers of such an approach:

Published parallel studies are fewer than influence studies, but have aroused more severe criticism. Critics warn of distortions made of texts taken out of context, and ask that scholars not make baseless, or ridiculous comparisons.¹⁴

Yet, after citing an example of a typical parallel study, the author decides to become more diplomatic than critical when he says:

The above paper bases its comparisons on literary characters to draw conclusions about society and economics, exceeding the limits of nationality and scholarly field to do so. Thus, it seems somewhat far-fetched. Yet, the paper is valuable for understanding the relations between economics and literature.¹⁵

Granted that comparative literature encourages interdisciplinary studies, yet the crucial question to be asked here is: What is the primary focus and ultimate goal of comparative literature? Of course, its degree of importance in the general hierarchy of human values depends on the critic's philosophy of life. The debate has gone on for centuries about the relative merits of the social versus the aesthetic function of literature. Although I think I have as solid an appreciation of the non-literary factors as the next critic, I do not feel comfortable when literature is used to demonstrate social and economic laws and principles.¹⁶

¹² Fang Fei, 'Ching-jen-te hsiang-ssu - shen-K'e-te ch'a-i,' *Guangming Ribao* (4 February 1984) 3

¹³ See Yuan Haoyi, 'Survey of Current Developments in the Comparative Literature of China,' *Cowrie: A Chinese Journal of Comparative Literature* 1, 1 (1983) 104.

¹⁴ Yuan, 108

¹⁵ Yuan, 110

¹⁶ Ts'ai Heng, 'Wang Hsi-feng yü Hao Ssu-chia: Pi-chiao yen-chiu i-te,' *Shan-hsi shih-ta hsieh-pao* (April 1983) 82-91

¹⁶ For an informative essay on this topic, see Douwe W. Fokkema, 'Strength and Weakness of the Marxist Theory of Literature with Reference to Marxist Criti-

If we subscribe to the notion that the purpose of comparing different literatures is to know better the works and authors compared, our questioning reaction to the above kinds of myopic comparison would be: What is the purpose of yoking together for comparison isolated works from the Chinese and Western literary traditions? Do we come away knowing the works or the writers better by juxtaposing them, or would we do just as well by reading them individually in isolation? If we compare at all, is it not in order to gain some kind of fresh knowledge or insights about the works or the writers which would not otherwise be revealed to us except through comparison? This kind of knowledge does not come very easily. Certainly, it does not come simply by listing a series of random similarities. In fact, these surface points of confluence could be misleading for they tend to obfuscate the more fundamental differences in the larger context of literary conventions and cultural orientations which separate the works in question.

When investigating these myopic comparisons, this problem of 'larger context' leads us to a second consideration, a far more fundamental and serious one. To put it simply, is it possible at all to locate a valid and viable basis of comparison from a few isolated writings when we are comparing genetically unrelated literatures? In particular, when comparing Chinese and Western literatures, can we adopt the familiar pattern followed by Western scholars when they compare, say, Mallarmé and Yeats, Keats and Novalis, etc.? My answer is negative. This is because the shared context of a similar cultural orientation which sets in meaningful relief the individual differences and similarities between related literatures is missing here. The Chinese-Western comparatist – if (s)he is serious at all – has the enormously difficult task of supplying that larger context. This can best be achieved by taking into account a whole concatenation of relevant works from the respective traditions. It is only by a careful study of sufficiently representative samplings from the traditions in question that certain patterns or meanings will emerge. Only then will there be the necessary basis for us to interpret comparatively in a meaningful way.

cism in the People's Republic of China,' *Chinese-Western Comparative Literature: Theory and Strategy*, ed. John J. Deeney (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press 1980) 113-28. Also instructive is the debate on modern Chinese fiction between Jaroslav Prusek (the socialist view) and C.T. Hsia (the aesthetic view) conveniently reproduced in Leo Ou-fan Lee's *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1980) 195-266.

Furthermore, in Chinese-Western comparative literature studies, the selection of material will have to be directed by a carefully chosen and worthwhile topic, a topic which has the potential of leading us to probe deeply into some fundamental questions about literature: for example, the relationship between poetry and music; the generic problems related to the study of the lyric and, for that matter, of the narrative or the dramatic mode; etc. Studies of this kind can yield illuminating and English novels; etc. Studies of this kind can yield illuminating results about the literatures compared which might otherwise remain undiscovered in a non-comparative reading. It is precisely by exploring these issues about the fundamental nature of literature as expressed in otherwise unrelated literary works that Chinese-Western comparative literature studies can make its unique contribution.

The myopic types of comparative studies I have been discussing do not come up with very convincing answers about the ultimate question: Why compare? The Marxist preoccupation with social-economic causes certainly cannot be regarded as manifesting a disinterested concern in the investigation of the nature of literature for its own sake. The fact that so many Chinese-Western comparative literature studies fall into this myopic category explains, to a great extent, why there is a relative lack of awareness about the importance of a clearly defined theory and methodology specifically suited to the comparison between Chinese and Western literatures.

HYPERMETROPIC COMPARISON

If the Marxist strand of myopic comparison seems mainly indigenous to Mainland China, the hypermetropic comparison figures rather prominently in Taiwan. This is particularly true of those comparative literature scholars who have been trained in the West. For instance, in a collection of critical essays on comparative literature written in Chinese and published in Taiwan (1976), the preface announced loud and clear that the definition of the so-called Chinese School of Comparative Literature means the application of Western literary theories and methodologies to the study of Chinese literature.¹⁷ The purpose and focus of the said collection was to document the development of such a Chinese School of Comparative Literature by publishing papers

¹⁷ Ku Tim-hung and Chen Hui-hua, eds., *Pi-chiao wen-hsüeh-te ken-to tsai Taiwan* (Taipei: Tung Ta 1976)

written in that vein.¹⁸ To be sure, applications of Western theories were introduced to the study of Chinese literature as far back as the turn of the century. The most eminent scholar in the late Ching period was Wang Kuo-wei. Other scholars of this century, such as Wen Yi-to, Chu Kuang-ch'ien, and the contemporary Ch'ien Chung-shu, also contributed much to the understanding of classical Chinese literature. But, their application of Western critical theories was, for the most part, carefully selected and guided by their solid grounding in classical Chinese literature. Many contemporary Chinese comparatists, however, due to drastic changes in the educational system, have not had the advantages of such training.

I have coined the term, hypermetropic comparison, to refer to the popular application of contemporary Western literary theories – in particular, but not exclusively, those of the structuralist persuasion – to Chinese literature. The somewhat aggressive manner of imposing Western critical thinking on Chinese literature is almost unprecedented. This looking so far afield, with its emphasis on theory – accompanied by an abundance of obtuse critical jargon – seems to have captivated some comparatists on Taiwan. The danger of this kind of approach lies in its undue confidence about the universal applicability of Western theory at the expense of the distinctive (and frequently intractable) features of Chinese literature. Understandably, such a practice has been attacked quite severely by scholars from local Chinese departments who feel that the native literature has been unduly bulied to no purpose.

What often happens with some comparatists of a structuralist persuasion, for example, is that they take a short story or poem and then apply one aspect after another of the structuralist theory. The intention seems to be a desire to reduce the text to its alleged basic components so as to fit it into a structuralist schema or model. What is the result of this type of study? Either something irrelevant or so obvious, so simple, that the average reader could hardly miss it. James Liu's remarks may serve as another kind of reaction. After reading one of these structuralist analyses of several Chinese short stories (with various references to the theories of Shklovsky, Tomaszewsky, Propp, Barthes, Genette, Todorov, and Greimas), he says:

Armed with such formidable paraphernalia, the author proceeds to reduce the

works to their supposed constituent elements, and finds that all of them are in binary opposition. To a non-structuralist, such reductive procedures are highly questionable. For one thing, there is a danger of not seeing the tree for the woods, of not recognizing the unique qualities of a literary work of art but only the common features it shares with all other works of the same genre. Furthermore, one may ask whether such exercises are intended to elucidate the works concerned, or to use these works to illustrate or justify a pre-existing theory. In other words, do critical theories exist to illuminate literary works, or do literary works exist to justify critical theories?¹⁹

To pursue Liu's point further, to what extent have these structuralist critics really succeeded in demonstrating the common features of all other works of the same genre? If they had accomplished as much, it would be no small achievement. But the results do not bear this out. Even in cases where isolating the common features of a given genre is the stated purpose of the analysis, the conclusions are less than convincing. We find, for example, the following admission at the end of the above study which James Liu has criticized: 'Our application of a western generic model to the T'ang short story(ies) has inevitably put two literary systems in confrontation and raised some hermeneutic problems yet to be solved.'²⁰

This admission is symptomatic of at least two crucial problems common to this approach. First, we may well ask, is it appropriate at all to use a Western model to analyze the T'ang *ch'uan chi* (short forms of fiction popular in the T'ang Dynasty)? Second, there is, in fact, no real confrontation between the two literary systems, for we don't find any short forms of Western fiction being compared with the Chinese ones in the paper. All we have are quotes from various strands of the structuralist theories qualifying and, simultaneously, confusing one another.

This is not to say that structuralism has little or nothing to contribute to the study of comparative literature. But the key point here is: If the structuralists wish to make a claim for universality, their studies should not only involve comparisons between related literatures but,

¹⁹ Rev. of *China and the West: Comparative Literature Studies*, ed. William Tay, Ying-hsiung Chou, and Hsiang-shiang Yuan (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press 1980), *Comparative Literature Studies* 18, ii (June 1981) 201

²⁰ Chang Han-liang, 'The Yang Lin Story Series: A Structural Analysis,' *Chinese-Western Comparative Literature: Theory and Strategy*, ed. John J. Deeney (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press 1980) 49

more importantly, comparisons between unrelated literatures. It is precisely in this sense that Claudio Guillén regards the study of unrelated writings (such as Eastern and Western literatures) as a *desideratum* central to comparative studies.

As a matter of fact, when Chinese-Western comparatists neglect the opportunity to confront and challenge structuralist theories with Chinese literary works, they are actually depriving the theories of a genuine claim to universal validity. Instead of subjugating the Chinese works to structuralist analysis, the comparatist should be thinking of reversing the process.

In this respect, Roman Jakobson's observation about the bi-polar tendency in human discourse and its relevance to literature, is particularly appropriate. Briefly, he observes that human 'discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity [including contrast] or through their contrastivity.²¹ He calls the former, the metaphorical line, which is most prominent in poetry; the latter, he refers to as the metonymical line, which is a dominant feature in prose. I should like to propose a possible third line from the Chinese literary tradition along which human discourse may take place where this bi-polar tendency may be synthesized.

I am thinking in particular of the relationship between *ch'ing* and *ching* in Chinese poetics. Briefly, *ch'ing* is about the poet's thoughts and feelings; *ching* usually refers to a scene in nature or external reality in general. Depiction of 'scene' has since the very beginning of Chinese poetry been regarded as the most natural and effective means of expressing feeling. Take, for example, the famous 'Song of the Yi River' by Ching Ke (B.C.?-227):

The wind is souging and the Yi river is cold;
From here the warrior departs never to return.²²

This is the lyric sung by the martyr, Ching Ke himself, just before leaving for his heroic mission to assassinate Ch'in Shih-huang, the first

Emperor of China. Line one describes the scene of the Yi River, where the hero sets out on his journey to the imperial court. There is a tragic grandeur in the chilling autumnal scene of the Yi River; the perpetual onward flow of the river subtly prefigures the headlong determination of the hero, as well as the impending gloom, for he, like the river, will never return. The brief lyric is a perfect example of how *scene* functions both as a physical context of the emotional focus of the poem and, at the same time, expresses that focus through similarity (or contrast, as the case may be). Hence, it relates to the tenor of the poem both contiguously and analogically.

The poetic theory of *ch'ing* and *ching* as correspondence, is essentially a theory based on the *hsing* mode of analogy in Chinese poetics. The notion, *hsing*, is a very complex and controversial Chinese critical term which may roughly be described as: a literary device to bring about the evocative interplay between the physical world and the human mind.²³

Still more important is observing the relationship between *ch'ing* and *ching* in its larger context. In other words, we should bear in mind that it is intimately related to the whole *kan-yin* theory, that is the affective orientation towards external reality in the Chinese tradition, something as central as the mimetic orientation is to the West. The fact that the *ch'ing-ching* correspondence seldom manifests itself in Western poetics is a highly telling phenomenon about some of its major distinctions from the Chinese tradition.²⁴ When we relate Jakobson's bi-polar theory to this notion of *ch'ing-ching* correspondence, we are not simply challenging the universality of that theory; more significantly, we are calling attention to a major difference between Chinese and Western poetics.

Another fruitful exchange can also be found between Chinese poetry and Jakobson's often quoted dictum about the poetic function: The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. The fact that, in Jakobson's words, 'Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence,²⁵ and thus produces a thickening effect of the language un-

21 Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, 'The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles,' *Fundamentals of Language*, 2nd revised edition, Janna Linguarum, Series Minor 1 (The Hague: Mouton 1977) 90

22 Ku shih yüan, comp. Shen Te-ch'ien (c. 1719; Shanghai: Commercial Press 1933)

18. The translation is my own.

23 See Sun, ch. 2, passim. My paper at the March, 1987, ACLA panel on 'Issues of Terminology' addresses problems related to this notion of *hsing*.

24 See Sun, passim.

25 'Linguistics and Poetics,' *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1960) 358

found in prose is most illuminating, especially when we consider differentiating characteristics between poetry and prose. I am referring in particular to the two modes of repetition in *The Book of Songs*. One mode is found in the following lyrics: 'Han kuang' (No. 88 [9]), 'Mo Kua' (No. 18 [64]), 'Chien chia' (No. 34 [129]), etc.²⁶ In these texts, the repetition appearing, with some variations, in each stanza of the poem, does not function as a constitutive device of the sequential development of the poem. The poem, in other words, regardless of its verbal movement from one stanza to another (punctuated by the repetition), stands still in an atemporal context as it centres around a certain emotional focus. The other mode of repetition is found in the poems, 'Kuan chü' (No. 87 [1]), 'Piao yu mei' (No. 17 [20]), 'Hsi yu ch'ang ch'u' (No. 2 [148]), etc.²⁷ These repetitions function instead as pointers to the sequential development of the poem, moving the poem along to its concluding stanza.

What do these two modes of repetition tell us about the nature of lyric and narrative? Can we call the poem with the first mode of repetition 'lyric,' because of its elaboration of a given sentiment in a non-temporal fashion; and the poem with the second mode of repetition chiefly 'narrative,' because of its interest in the sequential development of a certain sentiment or situation?²⁸ In addition, in what way can Jakobson's notion of parallelism illuminate the non-temporal nature of the first type of repetition, which is primarily lyrical? Conversely, does this non-temporal mode of repetition in *The Book of Songs* also help highlight the syntactical aspect of Jakobson's notion of equivalence as a constitutive device of sequence in poetic language?²⁹ Finally, how relevant is Paul Valéry's analogy about poetry as a form of dancing which does

²⁶ For a convenient English rendering of the original poems, see Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs* (1937, New York: Grove Press, 1968). Each poem is numbered according to Waley's own system; numbers in square brackets refer to the traditional identification system of the *Mao shih cheng chien* text in *Ssu pu pei yao*.

²⁷ Waley

²⁸ A more detailed discussion of these two modes of repetition in *The Book of Songs* was given as a talk at the 20th annual conference (November, 1986) of the American Association for Chinese Studies held at the University of Pittsburgh. The paper is being prepared for publication under the title, 'Modes of Refrain in the *Shih Ching* and Their Significance for Chinese Poetics.'

²⁹ Jakobson's notion of selection, which is intimately related to that of equivalence, is observed along an axis that is primarily lexical and semantic. But it

not move from point A to point B in a way that its more pedestrian prose counterpart does?

By asking these questions, I am suggesting that structuralist theory – and for that matter, many Western critical theories – can be far more illuminating to Chinese-Western comparative studies when we carefully scrutinize concrete literary works from both traditions in their respective cultural contexts. Instead of treating Chinese literature as merely something beholden to the West to facilitate better self-reflection, or as a passive recipient for Western theories to use as grist for their respective mills, comparatists should look to Chinese literature as something worthy of study in its own right. The Chinese experience may well be one of those great Eastern traditions which can actively challenge and enrich some of the West's most basic assumptions about the nature of literature.³⁰

University of Pittsburgh

would be possible, as Guillén suggests, to observe the operations on other levels of language such as syntax. See Guillén, 396-7.

³⁰ Another corollary and possible corrective for the various disorders in perspective I have been discussing in this paper would be for scholars interested in Chinese-Western comparative literature studies to explore comparisons between those adjacent cultures in Asia which have influenced each other so intimately over the centuries; namely, China, Korea, and Japan. For refreshing new perspectives on literature as viewed through other eyes, see, for instance, the publications of Peter H. Lee (Korean-Japanese-Chinese) and Earl Miner (Japanese poetics and its relevance to comparative literature). Paradoxically, this pioneering task of doing *Chinese-Eastern* comparative literature studies can, eventually, lead to a sharper focus and better perspective on the entire field of comparative literature. In short, this more truly international approach to relationships between long-neglected literatures of the East as well as to their distinctive literary contributions vis-à-vis the West.