

FLOWER IN THE MIRROR AND MOON IN THE
WATER:
THE PROBLEM OF CHINESE ALLEGORY REVISITED

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In the context of the rise of deconstructive criticism, it may not be a mere coincidence that from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, a series of articles and books in Sinology (comparative literature) demonstrated a preoccupation with rhetoric, paying special attention to the Chinese concept of metaphor and allegory.¹ The Western sense of allegory/metaphor,² as these articles and books invariably suggest (Saussy 24), is absent from Chinese poetics and its literature.³ To quote Andrew Plaks's description of this difference between East and West, "Representatives of the Chinese and European traditions are accorded a particular privilege of neat, even antipodal, contrast" (vii). While the Western sense of allegory/metaphor implies disjunction (Plaks 7; Owen 63; Yu, *Reading* 17; Yeh 250), its Chinese counterpart embodies a totalizing (Plaks 7, 109), coherent whole (Owen 23). Pre-established (Yu, *Reading* 33), historical (Owen 15, 57), and organic (Owen 42, 45, 59; Yeh 252), the Chinese allegory/metaphor is a synecdoche (Plaks 110; Owen 60; Yeh 238), not the substitution (Owen 60; Yeh 239). Given the milieu of deconstruction's remarks on language—the demystification of symbol/concept on the one hand and the corresponding rehabilitation of metaphor/allegory on the other—this series of books and articles, now in hindsight over thirty years later, seems an interesting phenomenon that deserves further examination.⁴ To take stock of this "neat contrast" between China and the West, we must first return to this body of published scholarship.

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Andrew Plaks is probably the first Sinologist to embark on the topic of allegory and Chinese literature at great length. In his 1976 book, *Archetype and Allegory in the Dream of the Red Chamber*, he attributes the lack of the Western sense of allegory in Chinese literature to the absence of the Western "ontological disjunction" in the Chinese worldview. Plaks has brought up such an argument as early as in the introduction when he discusses the meaning of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*:

Turning to a detailed inquiry into the nature of allegorical writing in the European tradition, with specific critical attention focused on the works of Dante, Chaucer, and Spenser, we find that the two-level ontological disjunction on which this mode is based in the West does not apply in the monistic universe of Chinese literature. (7)

466 Plaks's thesis entails two premises: that China is known for its ontological monism as opposed to ontological dualism of the West, and that the allegories in Dante, Chaucer, and Spenser are founded on the "two-level ontological disjunction." If we could set aside the age-old debate on whether the Chinese worldview is indeed monistic and involves no transcendence,⁵ the second premise, that ontological dualism serves as the foundation for the two-level structure of allegory, still invites reexamination. According to Plaks, the dichotomy between narrative and meaning in allegory is a "mimesis" (87, 93, 94) of the (Platonic) dichotomy between the physical and metaphysical. The allegorical fiction, in other words, is founded on the concrete, finite, visible, sublunary world, while the allegorical significance points to the truth of a transcendental nature (84-94). But as long as the Platonic dichotomy implies the concrete and the abstract, which could be found in the structure of allegory, this philosophical structure also entails the dichotomy between the perfect and the imperfect, the good and the bad, the original and the copy, which are not reflected in the structure of allegory. Rather than further explaining this premise of the structural similarity between the literary device and the philosophical vision, Plaks then goes into detail about the dichotomy within the narrative, the dichotomy between light and darkness, true and false, for example, in order to show the allegorists' mimesis of the ontological duality (95-108). The two levels of allegory, unlike the two levels in the platonic imagination, are nonetheless bounded because of their similarity (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1404b). Because of its monism, as Plaks concludes, which can be taken as a "spatial vision of totality," the Chinese literary universe correspondingly resembles "a single, total frame of reference," contrasting the Western "two planes in allegory" and the "two-level cosmology" (Plaks 109). The questions can be reduced to the following: what is the relationship between a dualistic/monistic worldview and a rhetorical device? Is language based on the worldview, or the other way around?

Starting from the inquiry into the presence and absence of a literary device, the book seems to end up discussing the ontological, or rather, theological differences between China and Europe, and the seeming absence of transcendence in the Chinese mindset is made as responsible for its absence of disjunction in its use of "allegory." This set of arguments, along with its vocabulary, narrative, and method, as we will see, has set the stage for the discussions of allegory and Chinese literature.

About a decade later, Stephen Owen also engaged with this topic in his 1985 book *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World*. Unlike Plaks, Owen focuses on poetry and poetics rather than philosophy or theology. But despite their divergence in methods and materials, Owen's observation of the Chinese sense of allegory/metaphor comes close to Plaks's thesis:

The differences between Chinese and Western modes of literary reading are centered in the related questions of metaphor and the presumed fictionality or nonfictionality of poems. Presumptions of a fictional text and of a metaphorical Truth run throughout Western modes of literary reading. In the Chinese tradition of reading, the meaning of a poem as a whole is usually not taken as metaphorical (except in a limited number of subgenres). (Owen 56-57)

According to Owen, Chinese poetry is essentially historical. If the persona sees himself as a gull between heaven and earth, to use Du Fu's image from Owen's example, he is literally experiencing this connection rather than exploiting the rhetorical device of a metaphor. The Chinese poetic tradition, as Owen notes (40-44), has nothing to do with invention or creation; rather, Chinese poetry is preoccupied with manifesting the world's inherent order—the Dao—"the world's coming-to-be" (20, 25). Images such as the gull, therefore, constitute the spontaneous process of uncovering this inherent order, which must be distinguished from the jarring Western metaphor that is based on fiction. This vision of literature, as Owen further shows, can be traced to Liu Xie's 劉勰 (465-522) *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* 文心雕龍. Recognized as the most comprehensive work on poetics in Chinese (Liu, *Chinese Theories* 21), this book, particularly its first chapter, "(Literature's) Source in the Dao 原道," constitutes the bedrock of Owen's thesis:

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Great is the fulfilled power of the aesthetic pattern, for it appeared along with the generation of Heaven and Earth. All color derives from a blending of the Dark of Heaven and Earth's Yellow; by the circularity of Heaven and Earth's squareness all shapes are differentiated. The successive disks of sun and moon are suspended configurations that make the heaven lovely, while the luminous intricacy of hills and streams unfold forms that order the earth. We might say that this is the aesthetic pattern of Natural Process (Tao). Above we may contemplate radiant brilliance; below we examine the latent sectioning; and in these we find the fixed positions of high and low. Thus the two basic Principles appear. Man, endowed with the spark of spiritual nature, is added to these to form the Great Triad. Man is the flower of the Elements and the mind of Heaven and Earth. With mind, language appears, and in language, aesthetic pattern becomes manifest. This is an inherent character of the Natural Process. (Owen 18-19)

文之為德也大矣，與天地並生者何哉！夫玄黃色雜，方圓體分，日月疊璧，以垂麗天之象；山川煥綺，以鋪理地之形：此蓋道之文也。仰觀吐曜，俯察含章，高卑定位，故兩儀既生矣。惟人參之，性靈所鍾，是謂三才。為五行之秀，實天地之心，心生而言立，言立而文明，自然之道也。

In the literary and philosophical traditions, the Wen 文, originally meaning the "aesthetic pattern" and later expanding to connote concepts such as "culture," "civilization," and "writing," is usually regarded, especially in Zhuangzi and Laozi, as the antithesis of nature. Here, by Liu Xie's sleight of hand, this "aesthetic pattern" is made to align with the natural order of the Dao. Just as the sun, the moon, the mountains, and the rivers are the "aesthetic patterns" of the Dao, writing, the "aesthetic pattern" of humanity, as Liu Xie contends, likewise originates from the Dao of Nature. To use Owen's words, writing from such a perspective "manifests and uncovers the Natural

Process.” However, no matter how grand and lofty this vision of writing may appear, the writing to which Liu Xie refers in this chapter is perhaps not the writing in general that Owen suggests. As he traces the history of writing in the remainder of the chapter, Liu Xie further defines his vision and confines it to the period from Fu Xi to Confucius: “From the time of Master Feng to the time of Confucius, both Feng, the first sage, who invented writing, and the ‘King Without Crown,’ who transmitted the teachings, drew their literary embellishments from the mind of Dao 爰自風姓，暨于孔氏，玄聖創典，素王述訓，莫不原道心以敷章” (Shih 18-19). According to Liu Xie, it is solely in the writings of the sages (Fuxi, Shun, and Confucius, for example) of the distant Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasty that the divine Dao can be found. Not all the writings, in other words, are to uncover the divine principles of Nature.

In the Preface 序志 to *The Literary Mind*, Liu Xie has made a clear distinction between the writings that are aligned with the Dao, and the writings of which he disapproves—writings that stand far from the Dao. Expressing his admiration for the

468 Confucian classics, which are in his mind the sources to which all masterpieces can be traced, Liu Xie contrasts them with the writings of his time:

Our time is far removed from that of the Sage, and orthodox literary style has declined: Tz'u writers love the exotic, and prize in their writing that which is superficial and eccentric. They try to “decorate the feather” just to be painting and will attempt to embroider even the leather handkerchief bag. All these writers deviate greatly from their true source in pursuit of the pretentious and the excessive. But in the *Book of History* in the discussion of *tz'u*, or language, it is said, “In writing one should emphasize the essentials.” And when Confucius presented his teachings, he showed a dislike for the unorthodoxy. Therefore, I picked up my brush, mixed the ink, and began to write this essay. (Shih 4-7)

而去聖久遠，文體解散，辭人愛奇，言貴浮詭，飾羽尚畫，文繡鞶帨，離本彌甚，將遂訛濫。蓋周書論辭，貴乎體要，尼父陳訓，惡乎異端，辭訓之奧，宜體于要。於是搦筆和墨，乃始論文。

In contrast to the classics that only address the essentials, contemporary literature is superficial, pretentious, and excessive. In Liu Xie's literary vision and ambition, there is clearly a distinction between the works of the Sages, or the Classics, and the works of ordinary men, always derivative of the Classics; a distinction between writing from the past and writing of the present; a distinction between writing on the “essentials” and writing that is “superficial and excessive”; and a distinction between works that manifest the Dao and works that have deviated from the Dao. Contrary to what Owen may have learned from the passage that he uses above, Liu Xie's poetics does not show what literature is, but rather what literature *is supposed to be* and what literature *had been*. The writings that manifest the divine Dao, neither the condition of Chinese literature nor how a Chinese mind regards a Chinese poem, are admittedly either the ideal works to which every writer should aspire, or the Classics that have been established by the Sages from the distant past. The very reason that Liu Xie “picks up the brush to write” lies in fact in his disappointment in the writings of his

time, his disappointment that in his day, literature, blemished with inessential ornaments, has failed to align with the essential Dao.

As a comprehensive study of poetics, Liu Xie's fifty-chapter book also includes a large section on how to write, featuring chapters on "Rhythm 聲律," "Parallel 儷辭," "Metaphor 比興," "Hyperbole 誇飾," "Example 事類," "Word Choice 練字," and "Reservation 隱秀," that discuss rhetorical devices with which we are familiar. In these chapters, Liu Xie frequently outlines his visions of better writing while offering practical strategies. In the chapter "Metaphor," for example, he contends that the excellence of a metaphor lies in the "aptness of representation 切至為貴," and that the ancient poems (the best, of course) could link things far apart as in the north and south, and match them seamlessly as though they were liver and gall 物雖胡越·合則肝膽. The best metaphor, both in the aesthetics of China and the West, as we shall see, will always be one in which the represented and the representation bind together as if they were "liver and gall."

Pauline Yu's *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* appeared two years after the publication of Owen's *Omen of the World*. According to Saussy, this 1987 study of the Chinese literary imagination is "the most systematic exploration and uncompromising analysis of the field of comparative poetics so far" (16-17). After discussing Plato's mimesis theory, Christian dualism, Renaissance poetics of "making," and Western transcendence—all of which she finds responsible for the "fundamental disjunction in a metaphor" (17), Yu, following in Plaks's footsteps, addresses the Chinese monistic worldview. "Indigenous Chinese philosophical tradition," as she writes, "agrees on a fundamentally monistic view of the universe" (32). After explaining the features of this Chinese monistic worldview that is envisioned by the Daoist philosophers such as Zhuangzi, Yu gives an overall account of the poetic assumptions in a Chinese mind:

Thus the Preface here can assume that what is internal (emotion) will naturally find some externally correlative form or action, and that poetry can spontaneously reflect, affect, and effect political and cosmic order. In other words, the seamless connection between the individual and the world enables the poem simultaneously to reveal feelings, provide an index of governmental stability, and serve as a didactic tool. Furthermore, the connections between subject and object or among objects, which the West has by and large credited to the creative ingenuity of the poet, are viewed in the Chinese tradition as already pre-established; the poet's primary achievement often lies in his ability to transcend, rather than to assert, his individuality and distinctiveness from the elements of the world. (32-33)

Similarly to Plaks's approach to literature, Yu regards worldview as a direct influence on poetic practice. Because the Daoist monistic worldview allows a "seamless connection between the individual and the world, between subject and object," the connection between poetry and the poet's intention is nothing but natural, spontaneous, and perhaps even pre-established. Like Owen, Yu offers a range of passages selected from Chinese poetics to illustrate her observation. Again, Liu Xie's *Literary*

Mind comes to the fore:

In literary thinking, one's spirit is far-reaching. Thus when one concentrates and ponders in silence, one's thoughts can touch a thousand years. With a quiet move of the face, one's gaze can penetrate ten thousand miles. [...] Before one's eyebrows and lashes, scenes of windblown clouds furl and unfurl.

These are what the order of thought attains. Therefore, when the order of thought is subtle, the spirit and objects wander together. (Yu 36)

文之思也，其神遠矣。故寂然凝慮，思接千載；悄焉動容，視通萬里；[...]眉睫之前，卷舒風雲之色；其思理之致乎！故思理為妙，神與物游。

470 To be sure, this famous passage from Liu's chapter "Spiritual Thought (Imagination) 神思," seems to present a poetic version of the Daoist monistic vision of the "unity" between the mind and the world. As the poet's mind joins with the far expanse of time and space, and as "his spirit and objects wander together," he has acquired the most resourceful mind and the most discerning eyes. Nonetheless, the poetic unity on which Liu Xie elaborates must have been different from, and even opposed to, the Daoist union between man and the universe. In the Daoist unity, one is supposed to forget oneself in order to join the external world. As intelligence, culture, and linguistic ability have all become worldly cares and impediments in the way of one's transcendence in the union with the Dao, one must brush these burdens aside. In other words, whereas the Daoist unity is predicated on the absence of the self, the poet, described by Liu Xie as full of the presence of himself, is incorporating history, landscape, space, and time—the entirety of the external world—all into his mind. The poetic unity in Liu Xie is in essence the totality and expansion of the self rather than the merging of the self into nature. It is the totality of the subject rather than the unity between the subject and object: "Thus the priority has passed from the outside world entirely within the subject, and we end up with something that resembles a radical idealism" (De Man, *Blindness* 196).

In addition, what this passage depicts is, admittedly, an ideal situation. Toward the end of this chapter, Liu Xie discusses the difficulties in finding the right ideas and the right, corresponding language: "The language may be so closely related to the ideas as if they were one, yet, they may differ as if they were a thousand miles apart 言授于意，密則無際，疏則千里" (Shih 301). If there were no disjunction between poetry and the poet's mind in the Chinese imagination, as Yu proposes, she is certainly invoking the most ideal situation rather than any kind of common reality with which a poet must come to terms.

The last important contribution in this series is Michelle Yeh's article "Metaphor and Bi: Western and Chinese Poetics," also published in 1987. Thanks to her adoption of the technical terms and her definitiveness, Yeh seems to have spelled out what Plaks, Owen, and Yu constantly suggest and insinuate, but do not claim overtly, on the issues of the Chinese sense of metaphor/allegory:

As a combination of two categories that share some similarities, *bi* echoes the Western

definition of metaphor. However, as we have discussed earlier, in Aristotle and many later theories, the difference between the tenor and the vehicle is equally essential and necessary. The tension that is generated from differences makes the juxtaposition both notable and valuable. The emphasis on tension also suggests that, although one can be used to describe the other, the two categories are two independent, mutually exclusive, self-contained entities. The relationship between them is essentially one of contrastive juxtaposition. This is exactly what we do not find in the Chinese *Bi*. [...] Instead of the tension and disjunction that we have observed in the Western concept of metaphor, *bi* presumes affinity and complementarity. (247, 250)

To summarize, whereas the Western metaphor is known for its “difference, tension, disjunction, and even contrast” between its tenor and vehicle, the Chinese “*bi* 比,” commonly translated into English as *to compare/comparison/metaphor/simile*, has little or none of the difference between the tenor and vehicle in the Chinese imagination. Yeh, following the examples of her predecessors, falls back in her arguments on the Daoist ideas of immanence and monism, as if philosophical vision had determined daily use of language, and as if the Chinese nation had already achieved Zhuangzi’s vision, the ultimate primitivism of “seeing all things as equal 齐物论.” If there are a tenor and a vehicle in the process of comparison in the first place, their very existence is predicated on the fact that they are already “two independent, mutually exclusive, self-contained entities” (Yeh 247).

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This set of theories of the Chinese sense of allegory/metaphor may not be foreign to Western readers. What Plaks, Owen, Yu, and Yeh have created, that is, these Chinese “antipodes” in literary theory, call to mind the vocabulary and ideas belonging to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western Symbolist aesthetics—the symbolic aesthetics and ideology that Paul de Man challenged.⁶ In his review of different European countries in which this phenomenon of the valorization of symbol takes place, de Man recapitulates the English branch of symbolism that is featured in Coleridge’s poetics:

We find in Coleridge what appears to be, at first sight, an unqualified assertion of the superiority of the symbol over allegory. The symbol is the product of the organic growth of form; in the world of the symbol, life and form are identical: “such as the life is, such is the form.” Its structure is that of the synecdoche, for the symbol is always a part of the totality that it represents. Consequently, in the symbolic imagination, no disjunction of the constitutive faculties takes place, since the material perception and the symbolical imagination are continuous, as the part is continuous with the whole. (De Man, *Blindness* 191)

Although it seems hard to pin down what Coleridge means by “life” and “form,” the set of terms he uses to describe symbol looks familiar. Symbol is superior in its “organic growth of form,” its “identification between life (the external world?) and

form (the poet's intention?), its structure of "synecdoche," and its scale of "totality." There is "no disjunction" of the "constitutive faculties" in the symbolic imagination, we are told, since nature (material perception) and mind (symbolic imagination) are "continuous, as the part is continuous with the whole." Pauline Yu could well have used this passage to describe the Chinese aesthetics of the "seamless connection between subject and object." Before Paul de Man, Gadamer also questioned the validity of the symbolic aesthetics in his 1960 book *Truth and Method*, an aesthetics that in his observation "refuses to distinguish between experience and the representation of this experience" (De Man, *Blindness* 188). To use Michelle Yeh's terms instead, the aesthetics of symbolism lies in its refusal to distinguish between the tenor and the vehicle. In the poetics of Novalis, the German forerunner of the symbolist movement, poetry is not artifice, and it has nothing to do with the making of language or any virtuosity of rhetoric.⁷ Historical, non-fictional, and pre-established, symbolist poetics is, by definition, the Chinese aesthetics and the Chinese allegory/metaphor that the American Sinologists-comparatists discussed here present.

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It has in fact been recognized that certain parallels do exist between the symbolic poetics and ideas in Chinese poetry. In his 1948 book *On Art* 談藝錄, Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書 (1910-98), the forerunner of Chinese-Western comparative poetics, includes the chapter, "Brémond on Poetry and Yan Yu's Poetics 白瑞蒙論詩與嚴滄浪詩話" (Qian 666-708), on the "hidden consensus between symbolism and Yan Yu's remarks on poetry 象徵派冥契滄浪之說詩" (Qian 683). Henri Brémond's *La poésie pure* (1925), according to Qian, can be taken as a summary of what the French symbolist poets, such as Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Valéry, had been proposing over the past fifty years. As with Novalis's ideas on poetry, their contentions that poetry does not rely on knowledge or logic, and that poetry should be in the closest area to the soul and the divine, as Qian notes, are in the same vein as the thirteenth-century critic Yan Yu's remarks on poetry of the High Tang period:

Poetry involves a distinct material that has nothing to do with books. Poetry involves a distinct interest that has nothing to do with natural principle. Still, if you don't read extensively and learn all there is to know about natural principle, you can't reach the highest level. But the very best involves what is known as "not getting onto the road of principles" and "not falling into the trap of words." Poetry is "to sing what is in the heart." In the stirring and excitement of their poetry, the High Tang writers were those antelopes that hang by their horns, leaving no tracks to be followed. Where they are subtle, there is a limpid and sparkling quality that can never be quite forced and made—like tones in the empty air, or color in a face, or moonlight in the water, or an image in a mirror—the words are exhausted, but the meaning is never exhausted.⁸

夫詩有別材，非關書也。詩有別趣，非關理也。然非多讀書多窮理則不能極其至。所謂不涉理路不落言筌者，上也。詩者，吟詠情性也。盛唐諸人惟在興趣，羚羊掛角，無跡可求。故其妙處，透徹玲瓏，不可湊泊，如空中之音，相中之色，水中之月，鏡中之象，言有盡而意無窮。

Describing the qualities of the most supreme poems, Yan Yu contrasts writing poetry

with learning from books or searching for principles. As with symbolist aesthetics, the critic obviously values natural talent over nurtured effort. “Poetry can never be quite forced and made 不可湊泊,” to repeat Yan Yu’s words. Having little to do with knowledge, technique, or even work in the making, poetry resembles “tones in the empty air, or color in a face, or moon in the water, or reflection in a mirror”—enchancing images occurring in the natural world that Buddhist teachings use as expressions of enlightenment (see Qian 243). Known as the first critic who has associated poetry with the metaphysical,⁹ Yan Yu sees their shared, common core in ‘enlightenment’: “Both the Dao of Buddhism and the Dao of Poetry depend on the wonderful enlightenment 大抵禪道惟在妙悟，詩道亦在妙悟，” as he famously claims (see also Qian 677). In Yan Yu’s poetics, poetry resembles the Daoist cultivation, which involves meditation, epiphany, and transcendence hopefully in the end. Such an affinity made between metaphysics and poetry has also featured in the symbolic imagination. Brémond’s other book, published in 1926, is actually titled “Prière et poésie.” In Novalis’s judgement, to use another example, true poets ought to have the soul of a priest.¹⁰

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This “wonderful enlightenment,” this divine epiphany described in poetics, as Qian Zhongshu further suggests, should be traced to Zhuangzi and Plotinus, both of whom have written about the mystic vision of merging with the Dao/God (see Qian 677, 683-707). The poet-priest—touched by nature’s grandeur and peace as if he had been overwhelmed and had forgotten himself—joins in with the creating force of the universe. But as discussed in Pauline Yu’s poetics of the unity between subject and object, mysticism and religion must have been fundamentally at odds with poetry (see Qian 235-49). Neither religion nor mysticism privileges language, for example. As long as meaning is captured and transcendence reached, language is to be dismissed as a tool. In addition, if one had truly forgotten oneself, whose condition might be compared to what happens in sleep or even in death, how could he compose a poem in the first place? There seems to be a real impasse for poets under the influence of such an aesthetics. Wang Shizhen 王士禛 (1634-1711), for example, who regards himself as a student of Yan Yu, while choosing mysticism over language, paradoxically claims that the best poetry is about forgetting language (Liu, *Chinese Theories* 44).¹¹ Mallarmé’s aesthetics of the blank, perhaps, also suggests some shared impatience with language. For loquacious human beings in the noisy human realm, silence, emptiness, and absence are perhaps the best conduits to imagine somewhere closer to the divine: “That which is not ineffable has no importance.” “The moonlight in the water,” however enchanting and luminous, is a reflection after all, always already absent from reality.

Despite these similarities in ideas between symbolism and Chinese poetry,¹² we should be clear that, unlike the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European symbolist movement, which was more or less a consistent trend, its Chinese “counterpart” has never been coherent. Wang Shizhen and Yan Yu are from two different eras with a time lapse of over four centuries. Yan Yu’s remarks on the “divine poetry”

cited above, as we will see, are but a few of his many insights on how to write, including the technical aspects of writing poetry. Needless to say, this association with the metaphysical in poetics, scattered throughout the history of Chinese poetics at least from the Tang to its last dynasty of the Qing, can never be considered as representing Chinese poetics as a whole, just as Symbolism is not representative (rather, one may argue, it is an exception) of Western poetics. As the examples from passages of *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* in our discussion of Stephen Owen and Pauline Yu have shown, Chinese critics/theorists rarely advocate one line of argument. Books on poetics in Chinese literature, usually more concerned with how to write than how to read, tend to offer a comprehensive, encyclopedic range of ideas on composition instead of explaining or advancing a single thesis. This is probably why, for Qian Zhongshu and many other traditional critics, Wang Shizhen's sole commitment to the metaphysical only reveals his misunderstanding of Yan Yu: it is nothing but an attempt to hide his own mediocrity in the abyss of mysticism (Qian 233). In

474 Yan Yu's judgement, furthermore, the poems that can be measured by the Buddhist terms of enlightenment are rare: only the poems of the eighth-century poets Li Bo and Du Fu come close to the divine. Prior to the passage cited above, Yan Yu even declares that no one, other than Li Bo and Du Fu, has the talent for such poetry. While talented poets such as Li Bo do not need books or instructions for writing, some prescriptive guidelines are still necessary for the majority of the lesser minds:

Poetry has five rules: 1) construction of form; 2) force of structure; 3) atmosphere; 4) stirring and excitement; 5) tone and rhythm. Poetry has nine categories: 1) lofty; 2) ancient; 3) deep; 4) far; 5) long; 6) potent, undifferentiated; 7) drifting aloof; 8) notable grief; 9) gentle melancholy.

These are three areas that demand care: 1) the opening and closing; 2) the rules for constructing lines; 3) the eye of the line. These are two overall situations: 1) straightforward and carefree; 2) firm, self-possessed, and at ease. There is only one supreme accomplishment: (entering the) divinity.

Where poetry has "divinity" it is perfect and has reached its limit; there is nothing to add to it. Only Li Bo and Tu Fu attained this; the others achieve it only imperfectly. (Owen 399-400)

詩之法有五：曰體制，曰格力，曰氣象，曰興趣，曰音節。詩之品有九：曰高，曰古，曰深，曰遠，曰長，曰雄渾，曰飄逸，曰悲壯，曰淒婉。其用工有三：曰起結，曰句法，曰字眼。其大概有二：曰優遊不迫，曰沈著痛快。詩之極致有一，曰入神。詩而入神，至矣，盡矣，蔑以加矣。惟李，杜得之。他人得之蓋寡也。¹³

Here, no longer measured by the Buddhist terms of enlightenment, poetry is categorized by its structure, forcefulness, rhythm, theme, mood, and other technical aspects. The poet needs to hone his skills particularly in three areas: sentence structure, beginning and ending, and the eye of a poem. In the end, Yan Yu tells us that a poem that has "entered the divinity" is an extraordinary accomplishment, achieved only by Li Bo and Du Fu. Such an aesthetics that is comparable to symbolic ideology, in other words, recognizes itself in the first place as an idealistic vision rather than an approachable condition. Whether or not this is Yan Yu's strategy in canonizing Li

Bo and Du Fu, such an aesthetics certainly cannot represent Chinese aesthetics in poetry as a whole.

In this regard, then, James J.Y. Liu's handy introduction to Chinese poetics, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, published in 1975, can be misleading. By disassembling the various strands of ideas in one work, such as the various ideas of Yan Yu and Liu Xie, and reassembling them into his structured account, Liu has developed "six kinds of theories of literature" (14) out of Chinese poetics. To reiterate Liu's guiding principle, as he is not interested in individual critics but in general theories, he "cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs" (14-15). Nonetheless, "an omelette" of Chinese theories of literature, with butter, pepper, and salt scrambled together, may be a far cry from the raw "eggs of remarks on poetry." To alert his reader of the potential misinterpretations, Liu makes the following disclaimer in his introduction:

For the present, I wish to point out that these theories are not necessarily incompatible with each other but often interrelated, since different theories can be derived from common sources, and one theory can give rise to or be merged with another, as a shift of focus or a change of point of view occurs. On the other hand, they can naturally cause contradictions. [...] I further wish to make clear that in distinguishing six kinds of theories, I do not imply the existence of six distinct schools of critics. In fact, Chinese critics are generally eclectic or syncretic, and it is common to find a critic who combines, say, an expressive theory with a pragmatic one. (14)

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The first theory that Liu introduces among his six, and probably his favourite theory, is based on the remarks that are associated with the Dao—the bits and pieces from Zhuangzi, Liu Xie, Yan Yu, and Wang Shizhen that we have looked at. Regarding this theory as a "distinctively Chinese contribution" (2, 16), Liu aptly calls it the "Metaphysical Theory." This Chinese "Metaphysical Theory," as he introduces to his Western readers, following the observation of Qian Zhongshu, shares certain aesthetic values with the Symbolist poets, particularly Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé (53-57, 154).

In a somewhat predictable and perhaps inevitable fashion, this system of "Chinese theories," with its own qualifications, when passed down to Liu's students and readers, has nonetheless undergone a drastic transformation. To borrow Liu's metaphor again, now the eggs seem to have fully been replaced by the omelette.

Pauline Yu's first published article with a comparative framework (her first article discusses Georges Poulet and the symbolist tradition), interestingly, concerns the East-West parallels in poetics rather than the East-West divide for which she is known. Taking her cue from James Liu, she revisits the resemblance between Chinese "Metaphysical Theory" and Western symbolism, and fleshes out the observations of Qian Zhongshu and James Liu. To reiterate, despite similarities in certain ideas, the Chinese "metaphysical" poetics is not a school but a self-acknowledged ideal within Chinese poetics. When elaborating on the Chinese absence of allegory/metaphor a few years later, one may wonder how Yu has managed to overcome the dismissal of allegory/metaphor in the symbolist aesthetics of the West. It seems worthwhile to

quote Pauline Yu's thesis on the China-West resemblance in full:

They are equally likely to be unaware that many of these same nineteenth- and twentieth-century notions also appeared in a radically different historical and cultural context—advocated by a tradition of Chinese literary critics which James J.Y. Liu has termed “metaphysical.” [...] In this essay, however, I shall be focusing not on Chinese critical theories as a whole, but solely on those which bear the most striking resemblances to our own modern Western poetic tradition—those of the “metaphysical” school—in the hope that the comparison will not only prove mutually illuminating, but will also suggest the possibility of a comparative poetics. [...] Both Chinese and Symbolist critics, then, advocate four notions: a method of indirection and suggestion; a preference for intuition over logic; a kind of impersonality; and a thoroughgoing unity of self and world, one which enables the fusion of emotion and scene and also obliterates such distinctions as that between subject and object. (“Chinese” 291, 309)

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By sleight of hand and the genius of the Sinologists-comparatists discussed here, ideals of the long history of Chinese poetics are made into a school of thought that sometimes comes close to Western symbolism, while these ideals, when taken as representing Chinese poetics as a whole, become the very antithesis of the West. The accounts of Chinese poetics made by Owen, Yu, and Yeh, while relying on the “Metaphysical Theory,” now make it impossible for us to tell whether we are reading tradition from the East or tradition from the West, whether we are confronting an alien, opposing Other that is our alternative, or whether we are, once again, running into a Self that has to be defined and displayed by a self-created Other.¹⁴ Is it because in these Chinese ideals, these critics have found the lost lustre of the symbolic theories that de Man had relentlessly taken apart? Is it because they need a playground for their literary fantasies so that a mystery will continue? Or is it because they are indeed blinded by the artificial naturalness of Chinese poetry, and mesmerized by its monosyllabic imageries and hieroglyphs?¹⁵

Much can be said about the problems of comparative literature (approaching China) now, whose sheer expansion urges the ambitious mind to capture the shimmering light of connection and contrast, to give meaning, to grasp insight, and whose blindness is not exempted from other disciplines and methods if they too, are founded on reading and interpretation. Standing in this ever-changing world, after all, we must hold on to a sense of presence and certainty, no matter how blind and illusory it could be. This is always already programmed in language, whose extremity can be seen in the valorization of concept and symbol. Much too still remains to be said about language and rhetoric on the Chinese side: Confucius' insistence on the Wen, his demand for refining one's thoughts in words, seems now, in a comparative framework, a demand for allegory.¹⁶

The most extraordinary poem, as imagined for us by Yan Yu, resembles a flower in

the mirror and the moon in the water, whose meaning will never be exhausted while words have long ended. Shimmering on the limpid water, the moon, reflected, draws the eyes of the earthly beholder, though illusory, yet enchantingly beautiful.

NOTES

1. Although Stephen Owen denies the influence of Western theories, which he calls “the whitecaps of the latest critical wave” on the first page of his book, and insists on his sole interest in Chinese poetry, his vocabulary, topics, and methods suggest otherwise. James Liu also mentions this interesting denial, as well as the presence of Deconstruction in Owen’s *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (see Liu’s review of this book, 580).
2. They tend to conflate allegory with metaphor, following Quintilian’s definition of allegory as a continued metaphor (see Plaks 92; Yu 19). Fletcher, however, is not in favour of this conflation (74-82).
3. A sample of these observations: “This may be explained partly by the absence of an articulated concept of allegory as distinguishable mode in Chinese literary theory” (Plaks 84); “Let us call these readings ‘transparencies’ to distinguish them from the disjunctive metaphorical operations of Western poetics. In the nonfictional Chinese lyric, the text is a limited window on a full world, ‘obscure’ from a distance but growing luminous and ‘manifest’ as we approach it (to paraphrase Liu Xie on reading)” (Owen 63); “It is precisely this ‘motive for metaphor’ which the Western reader will not find in Chinese literature, whether in poetry or the poetics” (Yu, “Metaphor” 213).
4. The influence of this series of books and articles is far reaching. As it has witnessed the institutionalization of Chinese literature in American academia that began in the late 1960s, and as it addresses the questions in rhetoric and language that are fundamental in literature, it is the basis for the study of Chinese literature and has set the tone for the method, narrative, assumption, and vocabulary in approaching and explaining Chinese literature. To be sure, such an influence has reached outside the American academy. The argument in this series has been recapitulated, for example, by Zheng Yuyu of Taiwan and Francois Jullien of France. See Zheng; see also chapter 8 in Jullien and Hawkes, *Detour and Access*.
5. This absence of transcendence in the Chinese worldview that Plaks (as well as Owen and Yu) has brought up, as Haun Saussy points out, resonates with some of the Jesuits’ judgement of China in the seventeenth century. Longobardi, for example, claims “that the Chinese, on the principles of their philosophy, have never known of any spiritual substance distinct, as we conceive of it, from matter; and that consequently they have known neither God nor angels nor the rational soul” (39). In his book *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic*, admired as “having more or less settled the decades-long debate over the ‘problem’ of metaphor in Chinese literature” (see Hayot 123), Saussy argues, to put it simply, that not only does China have allegory in the Western sense, but the East-West contrast is a willful construct. The so-called metaphysical level in the Western allegory can be physical, as a ship is compared to the State in the classic example given by Quintilian. Besides, if fragrance is considered only as a synecdoche of virtue in *Li Sao*, as the two belong to the same category, then this category itself—the Form of the Good—is by definition a category of the abstract (31). Towards the end of his argument, Saussy has become provocative: as Leibniz, in defense of Spinoza, is criticized as a materialistic Chinese pagan, doesn’t the West, in its constructing of an opposite China, betray its own disagreements and opposing ideas within itself (45)? Aren’t the defining qualities of the East also distinct features of the West? While Saussy is concerned with the interpretive side (allegory in reading) of allegory, as he in later chapters discusses the allegoresis of *Shijing*, I am here concerned with the side of poetics (allegory in writing).

Also, although it has long been acknowledged that the Dao is immanent within the physical world (thus monism), as in this much-cited passage from Zhuangzi, “the Dao is everywhere, in this ant, in this grass, in this earthenware tile, and in piss and shit,” it should also be remembered that the

Dao in Laozi's depiction is transcendental and immaterial: “視之不見名曰夷，聽之不聞名曰希，搏之不得名曰微。此三者不可致詰，故混而為一。” (*Tao Te Ching* 道德經, Chapter 14). See also Qian (676); see also Chen Guying's 陳鼓應 comment in *Laozi Annotation and Commentary* (15).

6. Since the romantic period and over the course of the nineteenth century, symbol had been privileged for its closeness to the truth of the world and the poet's intuition. “The advantage of symbolic writing over allegory is,” to borrow Coleridge's words, “that it presumes no disjunction of faculties, but simple dominance” (Fletcher 17). This presumed “simple dominance,” when under de Man's interrogation, has turned to be an illusion. The promised organic totality in symbolism—the aesthetics of the binding between the inner self and the outward nature without disjunction—can hardly be fulfilled, and is inherently self-contradictory. To use de Man's vocabulary and conclusion, symbolism resembles a form of self-mystification that wishes to overcome temporality through the self-deceiving identification with the outside Truth of the world (De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality”). To my knowledge, both Plaks and Yu have discussed symbol in their books, but both deem it unimportant to their arguments. See Plaks 90-91, in which he regards symbol as similar to allegory. Yu, who actually brings up the valorization of symbol over allegory as well as de Man's subsequent critique, dismisses this issue as “the subject of much discussion that need not concern us here” (see 27-30).
7. “Es gibt einen speziellen Sinn für Poesie—eine poetische Stimmung in uns. Die Poesie ist durchaus personell und darum unbeschreiblich und indefinissabel. Wer es nicht unmittelbar weiß und fühlt, was Poesie ist, dem läßt sich kein Begriff davon beibringen. Poesie ist Poesie. Von *Rede (Sprach) kunst* himmelweit verschieden.” See *Fragmente und Studien 1799-1800*, no. 185; I cite from Qian 674-75.
8. Yan Yu's *Poetics* 滄浪詩話. I am generally following Owen's translation in *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (406). The only revision I have made to Owen's translation is the phrase “不可湊泊,” which he translates as “that can never be quite fixed and determined.” In my understanding, this phrase suggests not so much that the subtlety of poetry cannot be determined (by its meaning), but that the subtlety of poetry cannot be forced.
9. According to Qian Zhongshu, this is a false belief, as the connection between Poetry and Buddhism is a popular topic throughout the Song dynasty (see Qian 636-48).
10. “Der echte Dichter ist aber immer Priester, so wie der echte Priester immer Dichter geblieben.” See *Fragmente und Studien 1797-1798*, no. 75; see also Qian 674.
11. As Wang Shizhen writes, “The Pentasyllabic Quatrains of the Tang poets often enter the realm of Buddhism and have the miraculousness of ‘getting the meaning and forgetting the words.’ 唐人五言絕句往往入禪，有得意忘言之妙。”
12. One may wonder whether there had been any substantial contact between China and Europe early in literary history. The Chinese aesthetic of the garden, the aesthetics of irregularity, asymmetry, surprise, and variety, has exerted a great influence on European gardens since the seventeenth century (see Lovejoy).
13. See also Qian 109.
14. The alien, opposing Other now turns out to be literally residing within the Self. I am thinking about Saussy's observation discussed earlier in this essay, as well as Rimbaud's “Je est un autre” (“I is another”).
15. While preparing for the allegoresis of the *Journey to the West* in another project, I encountered Ling Hon Lam's observation on the problem of the Chinese sense of allegory in his footnote, which explicitly points to what I am more or less suggesting here (except that I want to confine my speculation to poetics-aesthetics rather than extending it to the problem of modernity): “De Man rediscovers ‘an allegorical tradition’ in pre-Romantic and Romantic periods that works against the hegemony of symbol. [...] Plaks and Pauline Yu idealize the Chinese figure under the ideological sway of the Romantic symbol in order to deal with our own crisis of modernity. The organicistic imagination of symbol is a reaction to the modern split between subject and object” (Lam 174).

16. Here I refer to the association between the Wen and the animal fur that is made in the *Analects of Confucius*, where it defends the refinement of the Wen by invoking the likeness of the tiger and the dog if they are stripped of their fur. Such an understanding of the Wen has been developed in the poetics of Wang Chong 王充 (27-97) and Liu Xie; the prevalent aesthetics of “meaning lies outside the words 意在言外” that is championed by literati such as Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 (1002-60), Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-72), Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-86), and Hu Zi 胡子 (1095-1170), seems to me a further development of this Confucian acknowledgement of the Wen. See XII, 8 in the *Analects*.

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