

Fall 2014

Reflections on Literature : East and West

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Recommended Citation

Lee, Joseph Tse-Hei; Frank, Ronald K.; Wang, Ying; Lyu, Hongling; and Po, Li, "Reflections on Literature : East and West" (2014).
Global Asia Journal. Paper 15.
http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/global_asia_journal/15

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Social and Cultural Research

Reflections on Literature: East and West

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Hongling Lyu, Li Po, and Ying Wang

Occasional Paper No. 15
July 2014

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Reflections on Literature: East and West

**Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, Ronald K. Frank,
Hongling Lyu, Li Po, and Ying Wang**

Social and Cultural Research

Occasional Paper Series

Social and Cultural Research is an occasional paper series that promotes the interdisciplinary study of social and historical change in Hong Kong, China, and other parts of Asia. The appearance of papers in this series does not preclude later publication in revised version in an academic journal or book.

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Published and distributed by

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ISSN 1996-6784

Printed in Hong Kong

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Preface

Joseph Tse-Hei Lee and Ronald K. Frank

This occasional paper originated from a symposium on Chinese literature that was organized by the Confucius Institute at Pace University in Lower Manhattan, New York on October 8, 2013. The symposium coincided with the launching of a new B.A. major in Global Asia studies at Pace University, an interdisciplinary undergraduate program designed to explore the interconnectivity between various Asian civilizations and cultures from the past to the present.

This publication has three thematic essays written by professors from Pace University and Nanjing Normal University that discuss the similarities and differences between Chinese and western literature. Hongling Lyu identifies certain aesthetic differences between Chinese and western literature, and explains these divergences from a cross-cultural perspective. Her comparative analysis highlights the longstanding impacts of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Christianity on these literary traditions. Li Po presents an overview of the aesthetics of classical literature. In particular, he argues that the Confucian ideal of expressing the truth in writings (*wenyi zaidao* 文以載道) inspired each generation of literati to engage the world and work for political and social changes. Ying Wang draws on her expertise in French literature and feminist studies to discuss the challenge of reading Chinese literature from the historical, cross-cultural, and feminist perspectives. She suggests that one way of expanding the analytical scope is to examine the function of literature, and

the relationship between literature and reading in these traditions. Her suggestion challenges us to go beyond the conventional East-and-West divide with its predictable polarities, and gives us a feasible framework to evaluate the evolution of Chinese literature in the modern era.

Taken together, the findings and insights of these essays are relevant to the ongoing scholarly debate about the relationship between literature, politics, and art in modern China. Two of the latest studies investigate the various genres of modern literature in times of regime change, wars, and revolutions. Gloria Davis revisits Lu Xun (鲁迅, 1881–1936), the recognized founder of modern Chinese literature, and draws on strong tensions in his writings to highlight the larger intellectual battle between egalitarian thought and authoritarian impulse in twentieth-century China.¹ Xiaojue Wang moves beyond the 1949 political divide of the Cold War era to reconstruct the competing modes of envisioning a modern nation that were manifested in Chinese literature and culture on the mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities.² Faced with political and ideological rivalries, these modern Chinese writers continued to address controversial issues like nation, gender, class, colonialism, and diverse identities under the masks of communism, authoritarian rule, and anti-colonialism. Evidently, the development of Chinese literature has always been a complex cultural phenomenon, rooted in the context of particular historical settings, the rise of different genres, and the search for a new identity.



Source: Confucius Institute, Pace University, October 8, 2013

From Left to Right: Joseph Morreale (Pace University), Pan Zhen (Nanjing Normal University), Hongling Lyu (Nanjing Normal University), Li Po (Nanjing Normal University), Joseph Tse-Hei Lee (Pace University)

Emotion and Truth:

A Preliminary Comparison of Chinese and Western Literature

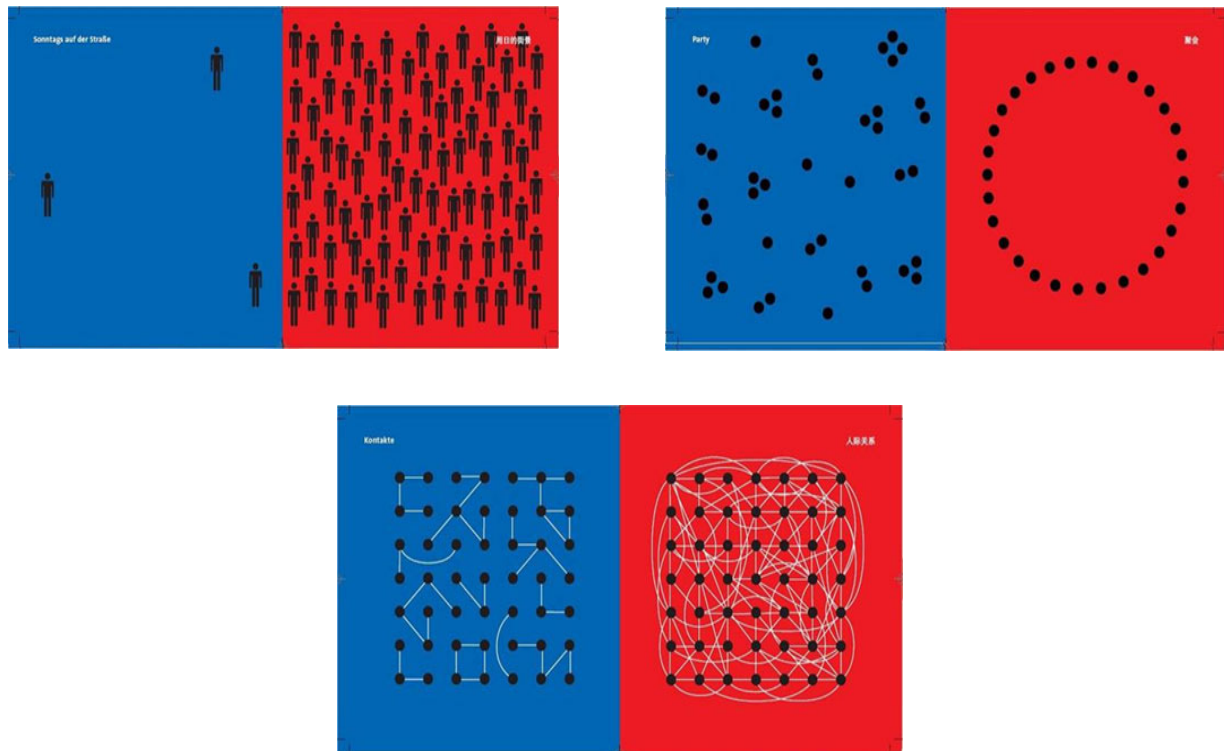
Hongling Lyu

Introduction

Both China and the West show much respect for humanity and display strong humanistic values, but they vary in representing such values in artistic and literary forms. Taking a look at the representations of love in some selected Chinese and western literary works, this article argues that Chinese literature concerns the aesthetics of emotion and ethics, whereas western literature is associated with the aesthetics of existential truth and reason. To conduct a comparative study of Chinese and western literature is a rather macroscopic task, but the following diagrams designed by Liu Yang (劉揚), a China-born German-based artist might offer us an interesting point of departure.³

These diagrams generalize the Chinese and westerners in different combinations: first, the Chinese outnumber the westerners in population; second, they display a habit of getting together and united as a whole; third, they develop a more complicated net of social relationships (*guanxi* 关系). How are these characterizations related to the subject of literature? Some generalizations may be helpful here: first, China is densely populated and has a long and rich literary tradition; second, the Chinese like to get together, and most of the Chinese literary works often have a happy ending; and third, the Chinese writers emphasize the complexity of human

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relationships, and their works are full of twists and turns, together with complicated emotions and interpersonal relations. As simplistic as they sound, these observations actually indicate the traditional ideal of unity (i.e., being one) in Chinese culture, and its longstanding influence on the literature. The Chinese treat each other as members of the same family, highlighting the significance of human relationship, and the Chinese literature has thus been characterized by its strong focus on social ethics. By comparison, the western culture, as shown in the diagrams, has much space, more straight lines, and sparser room, indicating a stronger focus on individuality and rationalistic relationship. The western literature, even while being lyric, would display strong elements of reason and religious faith.

Literary Expressions of Relationships and Ethics in East and West

Let me start with the number of human characters in the Chinese literary works, an element indicating that the idea of being part of a family and the functionality of human relationships and emotional ties often characterize the Chinese literature. Although it is not rare to find so many characters in a western novel such as *Ulysses*, *David Copperfield*, and *Moby Dick*, one is surprised at the sheer number of characters in three classic Chinese novels like *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (Hongloumeng 红楼梦), *Outlaws of the Marsh* (Shuihuzhuan 水浒传), and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguozhi 三國志). There are 983 characters in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, 1,191 characters in *Outlaws of the Marsh*, and 827 in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

What are the thematic threads that connect so many characters in a novel? The 983 characters in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* revolve around one family headed by a matriarch, and they are connected by the emotional ties between rulers and subjects, parents and children, spouses, siblings, and friends. This huge family becomes an epitome of the then feudal society. The novel opens with a statement, “this work for the most part is about emotion,” and the various plots of emotional affairs include love stories of youngsters, attachment between parents and children, incest, loyalty to the emperor and the state, and betrayal of friendships. The multiple layers of relationships in and out of a family are described in a complicated and meandering manner. In *Outlaws of the Marsh*, the 108 rebels are not from the same family, they share the common goal to overthrow the tyranny. They treat everyone as brothers and sisters, and may even die for each other in times of crisis. As their compassion and loyalty transcend the traditional kinship boundaries, these heroic characters form a close-knit family to fight for the same cause. In a similar fashion, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* concerns the brotherly love and

struggle of feudal lords and their followers, seeking to restore and unify the divided Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). The juxtaposition of family and nation is a dominant theme in these works.

Even in modern Chinese fictions, regardless of its diverse techniques, the concept of family and the importance of emotional links are always there. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (*Fengru feitun* 丰乳肥臀), written by Chinese Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan (莫言), also centers upon a family that survives through the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945) to the present, and portrays China as a country full of historical sweep and earthy exuberance. The literary image of the same big family runs through these works, and lays the narrative framework to construct complicated plots and characters. The same element also embodies the Chinese lyric tradition, expressing various sensibilities and realism.

Western literature has similar expressions concerning human relationship and family ethics, and it tends to dichotomize these issues as human sins versus salvation, human creativity versus alienation. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1804–1864) *The Scarlet Letter*, set in a Puritan context, the heroine Hester betrays her scheming and long-lost husband and falls in love with the priest Dimmesdale. The letter A that she is forced to wear symbolizes the repression of social morality and the harshness of puritan doctrines. The ideas of sin and punishment, repentance and dignity, freedom and humanity pervade the novel. William Golding's (1911–1993) *Lord of the Flies* allegorically explores human nature by putting home-lost boys and girls in an isolated island. The lord of the flies has a biblical connotation of the prime evil, symbolizing not only the ugly pig head but also the darkest human nature. In Christopher Marlow's (1564–1593) *Doctor Faustus*, the man sells his soul to the devil for power and knowledge; here, man's desire to know is tragically but powerfully presented.

Differences between Chinese and Western Poetry

A comparative look at the Chinese and western poetry yields more insights on the points of aesthetic convergence and divergence. In Chinese poetry, one can find the lyric feature of expressing emotion rather outstanding, and the idea of “harmony in the family” is transformed into a nostalgia for families, friends, and homelands. Western poetry, lyrical as it can be, contains more existential concerns and its reasoning logic is more obvious. When reading Chinese verses such as “Raising my head, I see the moon so bright; withdrawing my eyes, my nostalgia comes around (Jutou wang mingyue, ditou si guxiang 举头望明月，低头思故乡),” one can easily capture a strong sense of homesickness. Lines like “Such kindness of warm sun, can’t be repaid by grass (Sheiyan cuncao xin, baode sancunhui 谁言寸草心，报得三寸晖)” express a sense of regret that parental love can hardly be reciprocated by the children. Moreover, graceful and delicate love verses run like: “Very quietly I take my leave, As quietly as I came here; Gently I flick my sleeves, Not even a wisp of cloud will I bring away (Qiaoqiao de wo zoule, zhengru wo qiaoqiao de lai; Wo hui yi hui yixiu, bu daizou yipian yunca 悄悄的我走了，正如我悄悄的来；我挥一挥衣袖，不带走一片云彩).” It is not rare to find lyric poems in western works, especially those of the Romantic school that freely express one’s love for nature and mankind; however, those poems about existential value are quite striking.

Imagery constitutes a significant part of poetry. Ezra Pound (1885–1972), the famous American poet of imagism who is much impressed by the Chinese literature, uses “black bough” in his “In a Station of the Metro”⁴ to portray the dark damp station as a metaphor of the repressed atmosphere, the alienated existence of human beings, and even the desperation for life. Meanwhile, he also uses “faces” and “petals” to represent beauty and hope for human. All these images in the two lines

function properly to render the momentary impression about life and reality.

An interesting contrast can be discerned in this Chinese poem: “Withered vines, old trees, and sleepy crows, small bridge, running river, and several cottages; An ancient path, west wind and a lean horse; Afar the heart-broken is roaming (Kuteng laoshu hunya, xiaoqiao liushui renjia, gudaoxifeng shouma. Xiyang xixia, duanchangren zai tianya 枯藤老树昏鸦，小桥流水人家，古道西风瘦马。夕阳西下，断肠人在天涯).” The nine images are juxtaposed to show a wandering man, not accompanied by any relatives and friends, walking on an ancient path in a late autumn evening, not knowing where his destination will be and feeling depressed by the chaotic world. Emotionally appealing and sentimental, this is typical of the Chinese lyric tradition that employs multiple scenes to convey deep emotions.

This divergence—the aesthetics of emotion and ethics in China, and the aesthetics of existentialism and reason in the West—makes much sense when one takes a look at the literary representations of love. Love is praised in literature worldwide. In both Chinese and western literature, sincere love is celebrated, the loss of love is pitied, and the misery and happiness of love are well rendered. In William Butler Yeats’s (1865–1939) “When you are old,” the idea that the poet’s love will not fade when the girl grows old is so touching and affectionate. There are similar expressions in Chinese poems: “To hold your hand, to grow old with you (Zhizi zhi shou, yu zhi xielao 执子之手，与之偕老)” and “Eternal love between us two, Shall withstand the time apart (Liangqing ruoshi jiuchangshi, you qizai zhaozhao mumu 两情若是久长时，又岂在朝朝暮暮).”

Nevertheless, western poets express their pursuit of happiness more straightforward and daringly; Chinese poets appear to be reserved and pathetic. Classical Chinese poetry often shows the melancholy of being

separated from the lover and the grief of losing the lover. The expressions of sadness are often tactful and euphemistical. The poem "Forlorn" by Li Qingzhao (李清照, 1084–1151) is an example. She wrote the poem in less a year after the death of her husband. The lonely feeling is so densely and delicately expressed that one sees Lady Li meditating her own love, missing her lover and pitying herself. Another poem by Su Shi (苏轼, 1037–1101) also talks about his longing for the deceased wife in the dream. Not a few Chinese love poems carry on self-pitying and lamenting notes like them.

In western poetry, there are more audacious and logic-sounding love poems than such sad and sentimental ones. Petrarchan sonnets are known for the quest for unattainable love, which often frankly describes the woman as a forbidden tree. This emotional quest is shown in the works of later poets such as John Donne's (1572–1631) "The Flea." The quest for love is not hidden. The erotic sense is clearly and cleverly interwoven with a religious sense of "trinity": the flea sucks the man and the girl's blood, and together they become one. Another poet Robert Burns (1759–1796) demonstrates his love so directly and passionately that few girls would not be moved: "As fair art thou, my bonie lass, So deep in luve am I; And I will luve thee still, my dear, Till a' the seas gang dry. Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear, And the rocks melt wi' the sun; And I will luve thee still, my dear, While the sands o' life shall run." You can hardly expect such metaphysical or audacious cry for love by traditional Chinese poets, who would be reluctant to use words like "love" and "kiss," but often express the tender, sad emotions through images and scenes.

Different Representations of Women and Love

Noticeably, women characters in western and Chinese literature are also presented differently. Devils or angels as they are, women characters in western literature are often endowed with a sense of self-awareness and independence. They declare their love openly, like Anna Karenina to Vronsky, Mathilde de la Mole to Julien Sorel. In contrast, many Chinese female characters appear more obedient, desiring happiness but too timid or constrained to fight for it. Lin Daiyu in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* loves Jia Baoyu but does not express it directly; Zhu Yingtai loves Liang Shanbo in *Butterfly Lovers: Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (*Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* 梁山伯与祝英台), but she is too shy to reveal her passion. This culture of emotional restraint deepens their tragic experience.

In descriptions about love, the idea of sex or sexual consciousness is often the object in western literature. In Chinese literature, few poets are frank in love, and even fewer poets write about sex. This is also true for fictional narrative writings. In accordance with the traditional Chinese ethics, Chinese writers would portray the love stories tragically or comically as much as they could. The conflicts of emotions can be illustrated in a very minute way, and the stories can be rather complex and winding. But a direct portrayal of sexual love or consciousness is not in their favor. It is even true in some of the modern writings, like in the famous modern writer Ba Jin's (巴金, 1904–2005) novel *The Family* (*Jia* 家). He draws on the love stories of several young couples in the early 1920s to critique the impacts of feudal ethics and social changes on romantic love. The whole story is well-made and the emotion of love is clearly expressed. Other Chinese writers would not be as explicit as Ba Jin in expressing individual love and passion. But one should not forget some pre-modern works like *The Golden Lotus* (*Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅) and *Sex and Zen* (*Rouputuan*

玉蒲團), both being known for the pornographic contents and the rejection of public morality.

The same variations can be discerned in western literature. Jane Austen portrays love matters elegantly without revealing any erotic elements. But Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) and David H. Lawrence (1885–1930) are rather frank about forbidden passion in *Jude of the Obscure* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Émile Zola's (1840–1902) *La Terre* (1887) addresses sexuality with a pervasive sense of pessimism. Zola holds a writer should study human feelings, sexuality, and society thoroughly. On the theme of love, Chinese literature highlights the element of emotion in a delicate manner, and western literature honors the pursuit of love and sexual pleasure.

Discussion

How should we character these aesthetic and thematic differences in Chinese and western literature? Generally speaking, differences in these literary traditions reflect different cultural concerns in East and West. Confucianism and Daoism predominantly focus on this world and the family. Zhuangzi (莊子, 369–286 BC) states, “Everything coexists with me; everything and I are one (Tiandi yu wo bingsheng, 'er wanwu yu wo wei yi 天地与我并生，而万物与我为一). Another thinker Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, 179–104 BC) stresses that man is the essence of everything.⁵ In contrast to Christianity that sees God as the creator of the universe, Chinese thinkers hold that man coexist with nature, and affirm the hierarchy of human relationships as “the three cardinal guides” (i.e., the ruler over his subjects, the father over his sons, and the husband over his wife). This probably explains why the Chinese have long been used to highlighting man-to-man relation other than man-to-God relation when they write about man.

Furthermore, there is a common saying in China that we are in the same family, and the family is one unit. A family values emotional attachment, kinship ties, and love among family members, parents, spouses and siblings. Living in the same extended family, Chinese extend this kind of emotion to that for friends, nature, and motherland. This attachment to family values actually points to the basic features of Chinese literature that express one's emotions to homeland and nature in a lyric manner. This tradition can be seen in today's literature. Works by contemporary writers like Wang Shuo (王朔) and Mo Yan, no matter how avant-garde they are, still carry on the same lyric tradition to honor Chinese in their cultural context.

By comparison, western culture is more related to religion, and pays much attention to reason and humanism. According to Alan Bullock, "Western thought has treated man and the cosmos in three distinct modes."⁶ The first is a supernatural or transcendental mode. God is the focus; man is created by God. The second is a natural or scientific mode. Man is part of the natural order. The third is a humanistic mode, focusing on man; man's experience is the starting point for man to know himself, God and nature. These three modes suggest that western thought not only penetrates into the origin of man and cosmos but also focuses on man's understanding of God and nature. From Dante Alighieri's (1265–1321) *Divine Comedy*, William Shakespeare's (1564–1616) plays, Charles Dickens (1812–1870) and William Makepeace Thackeray's (1811–1863) novels, and T. S. Eliot's (1888–1965) poems, we can find the constant humanistic and religious concerns, criticizing human alienation and calling for a return to nature.

In other words, western literature is keen to understand the tangled relations between God, man and nature. It works hard to mimic the world, aiming to find out and reflect the truth of man and life either physically or

spiritually. No wonder we can find the rational or scientific flavor even in their expressions about love. Simply speaking, western literary conception is more epistemological compared with Chinese literary aesthetics of being lyric. Chinese literature values the aesthetics of emotion. It tends to express emotion via physical description, and believes that objects can be perceived with sensibility, which is well demonstrated in the long lyric literary tradition with emotion as its focus. The idea that Chinese literature is more lyric is not to deny its power of reason. Though Chinese and western literature never developed in parallel, they have impacted each other mutually. In the early 20th century, western literature was widely read by Chinese writers, and western literary techniques were transplanted into the Chinese writings. Chinese literature also influenced the West as one can see the works of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. In today's global village, Chinese and westerners ought to learn from each other so that they are not as isolated as those red and blue images shown by Liu Yang.

Classical Chinese Literature: Past and Present

Li Bo

On Classical Poems

This paper presents a preliminary overview of ancient Chinese literature. Several months ago, at the invitation of the State Council of China, I gave a lecture in Vancouver, a Canadian city 2,500 miles from New York. A sinologist from the University of British Columbia asked me, “Why did Confucius (孔子) pay so much attention to social reality of his time rather than some sensitive feelings deep in people’s heart?” A provocative question, I did not fully agree with his characterization of Confucius’ obsessive interest in human affairs. I immediately talked about Confucius’ tearful chanting on his deathbed. Evidence from historical records shows that at the age of 73, Confucius could not help but weeping when his student Zigong (子贡) visited him. Confucius recited a poem to express his emotion, “Ah! Mount Tai is crumbling! The pillar is falling! The sage is passing!”⁷

Although we can see the content of this poem today, ancient Chinese chanted poems in a totally different way. The word *shige* (诗歌) literally means poems and songs. People should follow the tone patterns and rules of the rhyme, in a fashion similar to the practice of chanting sonnets in Europe during the Renaissance. In my mind, Confucius should have been good at reciting poems. He was both a distinguished educator and a great musician of his time. Because he viewed music and learning to be complementary to each other, the essence of his educational ideas could

be summarized in the word rites (*li* 禮). An educated person should be taught in the ancient rites, mastering poetry, music, and etiquette of the ancient courts.

More than two thousand years later, a Chinese literary master Qian Mu (钱穆, 1895–1990) observed that the Confucian learning, especially its emphasis on “etiquette and music,” could reflect the sensitivity toward people’s inner feelings. In the ancient era, *The Book of Songs* reveals the same concern for people’s heart. If we today rediscover the recital methods of these songs, we will appreciate the literary representations of human emotions so many centuries ago. For example, most people call one of the songs, “The Reeds and the Rushes (*Jianjia* 蒹葭),” a sad poem. But when we recite it according to the ancient tune, we will be impressed by its harmonious beauty and cheerful emotion. This is exactly what love was portrayed in the literature during the pre-Qin period. Confucius and his contemporaries created this genre in poetry to address people’s deep emotions. This aesthetic element can still be seen in the Peking opera. The narrative plot of the opera is not as important as the singing. It is the singing that reflects the complicated emotions of different characters. In the Peking opera, each of the transition lines is not part of the opera songs, but needs to be performed rhythmically. There is a famous transition line in the opera “Silang Visiting his Mother (*Silang tanmu* 四郎探母): “The leaves of phoenix trees are caged in the golden well, like General Yang Silang besieged by his enemies. He sighed heavily, like a gust of wind (*Jinjing suo wutong, changtan kongsui yi zhenfeng* 金井锁梧桐，长叹空随一阵风).” These metaphors touch the audiences deeply.

On Classical Essays

Ancient Chinese literature is also full of rich sensibility and profound thoughts. Many Confucian thinkers upheld the idea that writings should express the truth (*wen yi zai dao* 文以载道). Cao Pi (曹丕, 187–226), the founder of the Wei dynasty (220–265), remarked, “Writing is as important as running a government; it is an immortal task (*Gai wenzhang, jingguo daye, buxiu zhi shengshi* 盖文章，经国之大业，不朽之盛事).” Following this calling, Fan Zhongyan (范仲淹, 989–1052), a politician and a literary scholar in the Song dynasty (960–1279), expressed this genuine interest in statecraft in his masterpiece, “On Yueyang Tower (*Yueyanglou ji* 岳阳楼记).” As Fan wrote, “Be the first to worry about the affairs of the state and the last to enjoy oneself! (*Xian tianxia zhi you 'er you, hou tianxia zhi le 'er le* 先天下之忧而忧，后天下之乐而乐).” When we recite this article, we will immediately capture the scenic views of Yueyang Tower and admire Fan’s passion for statecraft and literature. Fan’s essay was included by scholars of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) in *Perfected Admiration of Ancient Literature* (*Guwen Guanzhi* 古文观止), a collection of outstanding literary classical essays.

Popular novels and dramas were not as highly appreciated in the history of Chinese literature as in the West. Novels and dramas initially did not honor the heroic life story of the ruling elites, and Confucian literati usually favored poetry and essays. Since the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, novels and dramas had become part of the urban culture, and writers focused more on the stories of commoners. Till the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) periods, many novels and dramas reached an unprecedented level of popularity, the most notable ones being *humanity*. Then some classical works appeared like *Romance of the West Chamber* (*Xixiangji* 西厢记), *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭),

The Golden Lotus (Jinpingmei 金瓶梅), and *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglouloumeng 红楼梦).

Since the late Qing dynasty, the landscape of Chinese literature has witnessed dramatic transformation. While a sense of cultural pride led to a period of seclusion from the outside world, the multiple encounters with foreign powers gave rise to an inferiority complex. Long after the collapse of the Qing dynasty, Gu Hongming (辜鸿铭, 1857–1928), kept his queue, wore imperial-styled clothes, and advocated the restoration of monarchy. For a long time, queue symbolized the suppression of Confucian scholars by the Qing regime. When Gu walked into the lecture hall at Peking University, the whole class exploded in laughter because of his long queue. Gu mocked the students, “My pigtail is visible, but the pigtails in your mind are invisible!” A century later, Gu’s remarks can still enlighten the Chinese.

Chinese literature in the Republic of China emphasized people’s emotions and values. Shen Congwen (沈从文, 1902–1988) was twice nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature before Mo Yan (莫言). Without any formal academic training, it was through self-study that Shen became a great literary figure. The most exceptional literary figure in China today is Mo Yan, the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012. While his writing style is strongly influenced by magical realism, his acceptance speech at the award ceremony was not magical at all. The speech titled, “Storyteller,” moved the Chinese audiences deeply. He read, “When everyone around you is crying, you deserve to be allowed not to cry, and when the tears are all for show, your right not to cry is greater still.”⁸ This reveals his integrity and his refusal to conform to dominant norms.

To conclude, Chinese literature and culture has much to offer to the world. Voltaire’s (1694–1778) Enlightenment ideas were inspired by Confucianism, and Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz’s (1646–1716) binary

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theory was influenced by *The I-Ching*, or *Book of Changes* (易经). In the same way, western literature and culture has given much nutrition to Chinese. Without Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Mo Yan would not have produced many of his imaginative works and won the Nobel Prize. Mo Yan jokes about himself being a storyteller only, and his pen name "Mo Yan," when directly translated into English, simply means "Shut up!" Perhaps Mo Yan reminds us that only the genuine inner voice from our hearts could tell the most beautiful literature, and only the ideas that touch humankind can be everlasting.

Reading Literature from a Western Perspective

Ying Wang

Introduction

It is extremely hard, if not possible, to compare western and Chinese literature in a systematic, comprehensive and profound way, considering the different periods, the existence of a variety of schools and movements, and the presence of numerous genres in extensive western literary history. Our visiting Chinese scholars from Nanjing Normal University, both Hongling Lyu and Li Bo, have provided some insights into this issue. Through the thematic and aesthetic analysis of certain texts, they have contributed to an ongoing dialogue on cultural exchange between China and the West. Besides their intriguing discussions on the differences and similarities between these two literary traditions, what also interested me are their approaches of reading and interpreting certain Chinese and western canonical literary texts.

If a western scholar studies the themes of emotion and truth in Confucius (孔子)'s poems, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglouloumeng* 红楼梦), *The Scarlet's Letter* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, how would she/he read these texts? What methodology would she/he use? If various approaches exist, how would they differ from one another? These methodological questions are related to how we read literature, a challenge that has provoked ardent debates among western scholars and critics more than forty years ago, and it is still under discussion today. To broaden the dialogue on the study of Chinese and western literature, it would be

interesting to join in this debate by addressing the function of literature (why we read?), and the relationship between literature and reading (how we read?) in these two different cultures. As a researcher trained in the United States with a specialty in French literature and Women's Studies, I would like to first briefly present some main changes in the contemporary literary critical theory in the West. This is followed by an account of my own research on the discourse of disabled figures in nineteenth-century female writers' fictions, inspired and informed by new interdisciplinary literary study trends.

A Methodological Note

Reading and interpretation of literary texts cannot be conducted in a professional way without the guidance of critical theory. Even though philosophers, scholars and writers have been analyzing and evaluating writings since ancient times, major literary theory and schools of criticism that emerged in the twentieth century are the ones that have influenced and shaped contemporary scholars' perspective on literature. Beginning with structuralism and semiotics in the 1920s, many intellectual trends added to the basis of moral criticism and dramatic construction, which had been present since classical antiquity. The 1930s saw the introduction of formalism, along with a plethora of new "criticisms," in particular Marxist, Neo-Aristotelian, Psychoanalytic, and Jungian critiques. Post-structuralism and deconstruction came in the 1960s, along with feminist and reader-response criticism. The 1970s gave us gender and queer studies, the 1980s new historicism and cultural studies, and since the 1990s we engage in post-colonial criticism and disability studies.⁹

These new methodologies drawing their theoretical nutrients from philosophy, linguistics, sociology, history and psychology, have actually

challenged the traditional intellectual boundaries of literature: the territory of literature study has become an interdisciplinary field, instead of a domain solely reigned by the literature department at universities. While these critical approaches provide critics with new lens to examine literary texts, they also inspire them to persistently interrogate the traditional relation between author, text and reader. With these changes, just as Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray observe: "In colleges and universities, at least, people just don't talk about literature in the way they used to."¹⁰

Moreover, since the 1960s, with greater diversity of the student body within American higher education and identity politics informed by postmodern thoughts, a new generation of researchers started to question the literary canon itself, demanding expansion of the canon to include formerly ignored works by women and minorities. While scholars still acknowledge the importance of canonical writers and admire the beauty and truth represented by their works, they also seek to explore the truth, beauty and power perceived through the lenses of women, persons of color and other disadvantaged groups.¹¹

Today, the standard of truth and beauty in literature is no longer recognized as it used to be, but examined in a contextual way, inviting reflections on social-cultural factors and identity politics. Certainly, with the coexistence of traditional and postmodern thoughts and methodologies, the voices in the literary scholar circle are inharmonious and controversial. At least, however, these new approaches have broken down the consensus on the literature canon and the traditional value represented by it. The disagreements on the ways of reading and interpreting literature yield debates that invite us to join in to find our own voice and seek our own solution. In the light of feminism and disability studies theories, my current research project on the disabled figures in nineteenth-century French women writers' fictions is destined to join this discussion, interpreting the

complicated “truth” and “beauty” represented by the monstrous bodies in women’s writings.

My Ongoing Research in French Literature

Since the 1970s, with the development of the feminist movement and the creation of gender studies programs in universities, more and more literary critics have realized the important contributions made by women writers to nineteenth-century western literature. During the past thirty years, a great deal of research on women’s literature has been published, which helped to change the situation of women’s writing, and thus transformed the landscape of literary history. Although much extant research in this domain explores how difference and identity are represented in such politicized constructions as gender, race and sexuality, feminist criticism has generally overlooked the corporeal otherness we think of as physical disability that women writers evoke in their works. In fact, in the western patriarchal society of the nineteenth century, when the scientific, medical, religious and moral discourses were destined to justify the link between femininity and disability, the representation of corporeal deficiency in women’s fiction has a meaning that is worth exploring in order to understand its cultural, social and literary significance. If, as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue, in the literary discourse, the figure of physical deviance is a metaphor for resistance to the cultural convention that aims at reinforcing the norm in every aspect, then it is essential to examine a series of questions raised by disabled figures in women’s writings.¹² How do these writers incorporate the transgressing potential of physical difference in their writing strategy? How do they represent the deviant body in the category of gender? Do their narratives confirm or challenge the meaning that culture confers to physical disability and

gender otherness? Do these writers, “disabled” by their sex, considered as “others” of men, use the representation of corporeal deviance as a tool to transgress the social constraints? And could they succeed?

From a feminist perspective, considering the field of disability studies in socio-cultural and literary contexts, I examine four works of fiction to probe the relation between and among representations of disability, gender and women’s writing. My corpus includes *Anatole* (1815), *Olivier ou le secret* (1822), *Monsieur le Marquis de Pontanges* (1835) and *Laide* (1878), written respectively by Sophie Gay (1776–1852), Claire de Duras (1777–1828), Delphine de Girardin (1804–1855), and Juliette Lamber (1836–1936). The goal of my research is to show that the transgressive potential of the disabled body operates as a destabilizing element that challenges the so-called norm in terms of body, sexual relationship and narrative structure. By incorporating in their writing the disabled figure—bearer of corporeal deviance—women writers transfigure the social reality and question the hegemony of the “normate” that excludes disabled people as well as women. In this sense, the representation of disability should be considered as a strategy of emancipation that women writers incorporate in their writing activity.

If, as many philosophers, writers and critics agree, the ultimate function of literature consists in its liberating power that inspires us to question the reality, transgress the constraints and envision a better world,¹³ I consider this power as the highest “truth” of valuable literary texts that readers should seek and explore to make it survive the test of time. Since the 1960s, a series of changes in the western critical theory have transformed the study of literature, and modified the relation between author, text and reader. How do we read literature in the postmodern era? This is a question still under debate to which we can only offer some thoughts to probe potential venues.

Reflections on Literature: East and West

The emergence of a variety of critical approaches, however, did give readers more possibilities, more space and more freedom to study literary texts from multiple perspectives. The postmodern theories have engendered a new mode of reading which “should not be limited to the meaning that author himself/herself would have placed on it, [...] we can understand the text in ways that go beyond the ways it understands itself.”¹⁴ Indeed, the differences and similarities between Chinese and western literature can be examined through the literary texts themselves, considering their thematic and aesthetic dimensions. Seen from this perspective, the future comparison of these two literary traditions should not be restricted to the reflection on “truth” (theme) and “beauty” (style). The horizon of the exchange ought to be expanded by thinking of the relationship between the modes of writing and reading, and by discussing the questions thus engendered: What is literature and what does it do? How should we read literature? How do we attain freedom through reading?

Notes

¹ Gloria Davis, *Lu Xun's Revolution: Writing in a Time of Violence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

² Xiaojue Wang, *Modernity with a Cold War Face: Reimagining the Nation in Chinese Literature Across the 1949 Divide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

³ Rainer Falle, "East Meets West: An Infographic Portrait by Yang Liu," 2013. Retrieved on February 8, 2014 from <http://bsix12.com/east-meets-west/>

⁴ "The apparition of faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough."

⁵ Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒), *Chunqiu fanlu (Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals 春秋繁露)* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), p.209.

⁶ Alan Bullock, *The Humanist Tradition in the West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), p.16.

⁷ Michael Nylan and Thomas Wilson, *Lives of Confucius: Civilization's Greatest Sage through the Ages* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), p.2.

⁸ Mo Yan, "Storytellers." December 7, 2012. Retrieved on February 13, 2014 from http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2012/yan-lecture_en.html

⁹ The OWL (Online Writing Lab.) at Purdue University. 2012. "Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism." Retrieved on January 9, 2014 from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/01/>

¹⁰ Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, "Preface." In Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, eds. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), p.vii.

¹¹ Murfin and Ray, "Preface," pp.vii—xi. David H. Richter, "Introduction." In David H. Richter, ed. *Falling Into Theory* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), pp.7—10.

¹² David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

Reflections on Literature: East and West

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations, II : Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (What Is Literature?) (Paris: Gallimard, 1948); Antoine Compagnon, *La littérature pour quoi faire?* (What Can Literature Do?) (Paris : Collège de France, 2007).

¹⁴ David H. Richter, "Introduction." In David H. Richter, ed. *Falling Into Theory* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), p.4.

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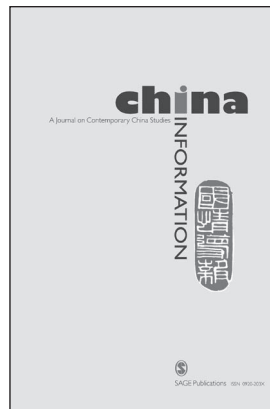
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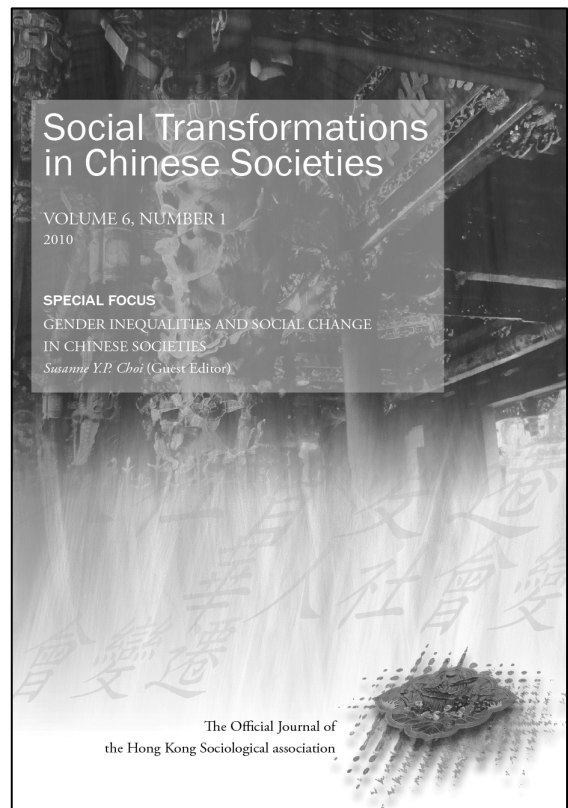
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Edited by Siu-Keung Cheung, Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, Lida V. Nedilsky

Siu-Keung Cheung is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Hong Kong Shue Yan University.

Joseph Tse-Hei Lee is Professor of History at Pace University, New York.

Lida V. Nedilsky is Associate Professor of Sociology at North Park University, Chicago.

Palgrave Macmillan

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ISBN: 978-0-230-61423-9

ISBN-10: 0-230-61423-X

This collection of historical and contemporary accounts of minority formation debunks popular misconceptions about China's highly centralized state and seemingly homogeneous society. Drawing on archival research, interviews, and field work, it documents how state and citizens meet in a politics of minority recognition and highlights China's growing awareness of rights.

Reviews

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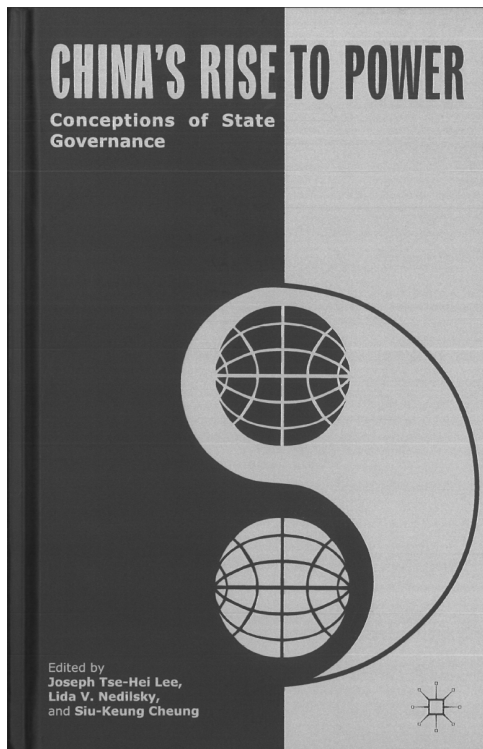
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**Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, Lida V. Nedilsky, and Siu-Keung Cheung, ed.,
China's Rise to Power: Conceptions of State Governance (New York:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)**



This collection looks at various strategies that China has deployed to project its newfound power in different parts of the world. One such strategy has been the rhetoric of “peaceful development” and “harmonious society,” devised to ease anxieties about China’s global expansion, maintain authoritarian rule at home, and articulate an inclusive identity for its diverse populations. Yet China still faces the problem of effective governance, for coinciding with its economic success is the political awakening of its citizens and with it the rise of organized activism on an unprecedented level.

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Reviews

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— Frans-Paul van der Putten, senior research fellow,
The Netherlands Institute of International Relations

“These ten essays cover diverse aspects of the rise of China, all related to the state-sponsored wish for the harmonious society and its opposite, which is discontent. By looking at case studies varying regionally from Xinjiang in the northwest to Macau in the southeast and topically from feminism to memories of a 1900 massacre, the writers suggest a society with enormous and worsening tensions, which authorities attempt to ease and cover up through appeals to harmony. Beautifully edited and with well-chosen and interesting themes, this book is a real contribution to the literature on contemporary China.”

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Griffith University, Australia

“This collection of learned essays broadens our understanding of China's rapid transformation in the twenty-first century. These valuable contributions offer fresh perspectives on the contradictions emerging in China's rise as a global player.”

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Biography

Joseph Tse-Hei Lee is a professor of History at Pace University, New York.

Lida V. Nedilsky is a professor of Sociology at North Park University, Chicago.

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Reviews

Raymond C. F. CHUI, *Transnationalism and Migration: Chinese Migrants in New Zealand* (July 2008).

“This paper, with its rich empirical data, robust methodology, and strong theorization, should be recommended to all researchers on transnationalism and contemporary migration.” – Prof. Manying Ip, University of Auckland, New Zealand, *Asia Pacific World*

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