

Chinese Literature as Part of World Literature

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The sciences – according to a common understanding – possess a universalistic claim. As a rule, we try to establish universally valid theories and definitions beyond particular cultural phenomenal differences. But the sciences are also a modern European invention. And so it is not surprising that, everywhere in the world, scientific concepts and categories are determined on the basis of one particular cultural – namely European/American – provenance. This trend is reinforced by the fact that, in the course of modernization, almost everywhere in the world European/American views have been adopted unquestioningly as standards. The following assessment which is by an African could just as well apply to a Chinese:

Which European could ever praise himself (or complain about) having put as much time, studies and effort into the learning of another 'traditional' society as the thousands of Third-World intellectuals who have studied in the school of Europe?¹

In other words, "Western modernity" is only the continuation of a long, *local cultural* tradition.

"Comparative Literature" is part of this Euro-centric academic (or scientific) endeavour. Thus, a modern and in Europe common understanding of literature which starts from its own tradition, namely Homeric epics and Greek dramas, culminating in the novel and drama of modern times, tends to put the fictional nature as an overarching characterization of literature in the foreground. However, literature as part of the humanities is also historically – and now as well comparatively – oriented. This means, in view of a concept of literature, that the discussion of such a topic can only proceed on the basis of historical genesis and in comparison with the notion of literature in other cultures. Hence, concepts of literature, different to Western notions, should be taken note of when discussing any national literature in the context of World Literature, also Chinese literature. As will become apparent further below, after

¹ Ahmed Baba Miské, *Lettre ouverte aux élites du Tiers-Monde*, Paris: Minerve, 1981, p. 143.

having gained a view of China's example, fictionality might not suffice as a universal quintessence of literature.

In the following, first a Chinese understanding of literature will be traced from pre-modernity to modernity. Needless to say, this shall not constitute an attempt to impose an all-embracing comprehensive concept of literature to the more than two thousand years of Chinese history of literature – such concerns would rightly be regarded as unhistorical and generalizing and should thus be rejected. Much rather, in a historical overview, trends will be identified from which an approach to a traditional Chinese concept of literature might be possible. Against this backdrop and secondly, the relevance of Chinese literature within a (Western) concept of World Literature shall be discussed, and this on the basis of a representative collection: *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* (in 6 Vols.). Thereafter, I shall conclude by turning to Goethe's idea of World Literature which he conceived of mainly through an encounter with Chinese literature.

1. The Chinese Writing and Written Language

The "literatures" (*belles lettres* – and thus today's fiction) are a European invention of the 18th century. Etymologically, literature is what is "written" (lat.: *letterae* – the letters). And so the pre-modern European notion of literature tended less toward some kind of "aestheticism" but rather to erudition or "learning"; i.e, its object was the comprehensive knowledge of the written tradition. Regarding this conceptual history, there is already a parallel to a Chinese notion of literature: Apart from the fact that there we have – unlike the European development – not the epic and drama, but the poem at the forefront of literature, we also have with the important Chinese term *wen* 文 – "writing, literature" – an equivalent to the pre-modern European concept of literature.

Regarding a pre-modern understanding of literature in China, two distinctly Chinese peculiarities have to be considered: the language and script as well as the role of literati-officials as guardians of a cultural tradition based on writing. As is well-known, Chinese is an isolating, non-inflecting and tonal language of which the smallest units of meaning (morphemes) are pronounced with one syllable and are intonated (in modern standard Chinese) in four different ways: the so-called four tones. In writing,

these smallest units of meaning are the characters. Texts in classical Chinese literary language – which is different from modern spoken Chinese but which was, until the beginning of the 20th century, the established literary expression – are characterized by economy of expression: A character marks usually a word which cannot be inflected (though often with a dazzling variety of meanings). There are no articles; pronouns as well as conjunctions, all can largely be dispensed with. Often there is no difference between nominal, adjective and verbal use of the words. With these features, the ancient texts sometimes possess a remarkable semantic openness which allows for interpretation and entails an aesthetically effective suggestive potential.

Although, over the centuries, the Chinese written language (*wenyan* 文言) absorbed the input of contemporary colloquialisms, it still represents an own idiom to be understood purely as writing. Like all the languages of the world, the spoken language of the Chinese people has altered a lot throughout history, thus also the pronunciation of Chinese characters. But what is remarkable in the Chinese written language is the fact that the change in pronunciation does not adversely affect the understanding of ancient texts (unlike Old or Middle High German or Old French and Old English). People read the ancient writings with the contemporary pronunciation, with the result that, for example in poetry, sometimes the rhymes don't quite agree, but this does not distract from the understanding of the writing. This adaptability to contemporary reading of ancient Chinese texts also guaranteed the durability of the classical canon. And since the grammar, as it were, is embedded in these texts, it was always possible to write essays according to classical patterns found in the ancient texts.

Two features deserve more mention: the popularity of parallelisms and allusions. Due to the base of syllable-sense units in the form of characters, it is easy to have arrangements of sentences – or poetry lines – with the same line length and number of characters per line, that is, as pairings of two parallel lines. Each character of a line – as a single syllable and word – can thus find its counterpart in the other, whereby the correspondences are usually carried out according to semantic fields. This parallelism *membrorum*, especially the antithetical parallelism (*duiyzhang* 对仗), became one of the most characteristic features of Chinese poetry and prose. Of course, other languages and cultural traditions, such as ours, also know parallelism

as a rhetoric device, but due to linguistic structures, the possibilities are in no way comparable with the Chinese.² This goes so far that some classical texts with their notorious semantic openness and indeterminacy can only be understood and translated after considering the parallel structures.³ The parallel arrangements eventually also helped the Chinese literati with the memorization of entire text corpuses.

Since the literati were acquainted with the entire literary tradition, they loved to allude to these texts by way of quotations (sometimes slightly altered) – and since their literary colleagues were no less well-read, they didn't fear not being understood. Rather, these allusions lend an additional attraction to their texts. There were even schools of poetry in which the skillful manipulation of allusions was elevated to a great art.⁴ Thus, the texts had a remarkable feature which only in the postmodern era has gained importance, namely a high degree of intertextuality.

In addition, the Chinese writing has a pictorial dimension. Although it is strictly speaking not pictorial writing (the vast majority of Chinese characters is organized not according to pictorial, but to phonetic principles), it has, just from its origins, a very pictorial and also symbolic component which is still reflected in many characters: the pictograms. In this respect, we find ingrained in the Chinese writing an imagery that further takes shape as figurative and poetic expression in literature, especially in poetry.

2. The Chinese *Literatus*

The ability to use the written language distinguished the members of a cultural and political elite in China. In this respect, we have a close relationship between literary education and political power in China, based on writing. The pre-modern Confucian literati (*wenren* 文人 – "men of literature"), as specialists on canonical texts of the past, were writers and officials who, in order to attain their civil servant status, had to prove themselves through an elaborate examination system to be primarily

² The predilection for parallel structures is also prefigured through the dominance of the correlative *Yin-Yang* thought. That is, everything belongs to either one of these dual cosmic forces; and universal harmony is achieved only through a balancing or matching of the two.

³ Joachim Gentz, "Zum Parallelismus in der chinesischen Literatur", in: Andreas Wagner (Ed.): *Parallelismus Membrorum*. Fribourg, Göttingen 2007, p. 241-269

⁴ Such as the Jiangxi 江西 school of poetry around Huang Tingjian 黄庭坚 (1045-1105).

connoisseurs of their written tradition. The themes of examinations, which existed since the beginning of the 7th century AD, were the classic writings of the Confucian tradition. Essays had to be written around these texts (from the Ming period on, i.e. from about the 14th/15th century, in the meticulously regulated form of the "Eight-legged Essay" (*baguwen* 八股文)⁵; hence the candidates knew this entire canon (more than 400,000 characters) by heart. As a collection of songs from the first Millennium BC was among the classics – the canonical *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 诗经) – literature, in the strict sense, was already an examination topic. The demands increased when in the 8th century (Tang Dynasty) the writing of poetry was required for the examinations. In order to master also this part of their exams, the literati were familiar with the poetic *œuvres* of all great poets, in other words, they also knew them by heart. This phenomenal memory performance as a necessity for exam preparation explains the stupendous erudition of pre-modern Chinese literati.

3. Writing and Literature (*wen*) as a Cultural Tradition

The literati-officials were thus, as it were, the guardians of a literacy-based cultural tradition. The character *wen*, which stands for this kind of literacy, therefore, has to be examined first for a Chinese concept of literature, particularly because it stands, in the modern combinations *wenxue* 文学 (literally: "learning of writing") or *wenzhang* 文章 ("literary work"), for "literature" in a narrower sense.⁶ *Wen* has the original meaning "pattern" (crossed lines). In the classical Zhou period (11th-3rd century BC), this meant mainly "design" and "rhetorical ornaments" – i.e. "beautiful exterior" as opposed to "substance" or "inner essence" (*zhi* 质). Derived from this, *wen* was used later also in a general sense as "formally crafted literature" in contrast to "everyday prose" (*bi* 笔).⁷ Another important sense of *wen* is "civil", "civilizing" or "cultivating" (as opposed to "martial" – *wu* 武) which even resonates today in the common term for "culture" (*wenhua* 文化). The character *wen*, therefore, entails an aesthetic ("beautiful

⁵ Ching-I Tu, "The Chinese Examination Essay: Some Literary Considerations", in: *Monumenta Serica* 31, (1974–75), p. 404.

⁶ The complex history of *wenzhang* is investigated in detail in Martin Kern's well researched article "Ritual, Text, and the Formation of the Canon. Historical Transitions of Wen in Early China", in: *T'oung Pao* 87 (2001), p. 43-91.

⁷ Pauline Yu, "Formal Distinctions in Chinese Literary Theory", in: Susan Bush / Christian Murck (Eds.): *Theories of the Arts in China*. Princeton 1985, p. 27-56

figure”), but also an educational, cultivating aspect. In the meaning as “literature”, the character *wen* was used only from the late Han period on (1st-2nd century AD). This initially involved the major canonical works, namely the Confucian classics (*jing* 经), the writings of the philosophical schools (*zi* 子) of the late Zhou period (6th-3rd century BC), historiography (*shi* 史) from the early Han period on (2nd century BC) and collections of poetry (*ji* 集)⁸.

The importance of *wen* in early Chinese thought might be fathomed from its treatment in a work that, as a comprehensive reflection on various aspects of literature, stands unique in the history of Chinese literature: *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin Diaolong* 文心雕龙) of Liu Xie 刘勰 (c. 465 - c. 522-539). In the first chapter “On the Origin, the *Dao*” (*Yuan dao* 原道), Liu Xie discusses the origin of literature in a cosmological sense. Here, he plays with the various meanings of the character *wen* (as pattern/shape, culture/civilization and literature) and comes up with the following analogy: On the one hand, *wen* (understood as pattern) is the patterned form of nature; so he considers the celestial bodies, the sun, moon and stars as well as the forms of the earth, namely mountains and waters, as a “pattern of *Dao*” (*dao zhi wen* 道之文). On the other hand, *wen* is the human mind (*xin* 心) which takes shape in the form of literary patterns. Nature works entirely “by itself” (*ziran* 自然) and thus represents itself in perfect forms, for example, in the clouds in the sky or the flowers on earth. These visible forms he calls “signs” (*zhang* 章). There are also audible patterns such as when a stream flows over rocks, which he again calls *wen* 文. (The basis of this play of words is related to a Chinese word for literature: The composite word *wenzhang* 文章 – as a combination of the visible and audible patterns – was and still is a common Chinese term for literary works.) Now, he asks, if the natural things that have no consciousness represent themselves in such perfect shape, how could the creature which is provided with spirit (*xin*) – man – not also have its own forms of expression? So in this first chapter, Liu presents the thesis that literature (*wen*) is the ordered pattern (*wen*) of the human spirit – mediated by language: “With the emergence of mind, language is created, and when language is

⁸ These groups form the four different sections of the traditional Chinese library (*sibu* 四部 or *siku* 四库).

created, writing appears."⁹ Ultimately, however, he understands *wen* in an even broader sense, namely in its third meaning as the cultivating "teachings of the sages of antiquity" which help giving shape to human society, in particular the teachings of Confucius. So he says: "*Dao* 道 is handed down in writing (*wen*) through sages, and (...) sages make *Dao* manifest in their writings."¹⁰

Thus we have a grand analogy, comprising the universe, man and the sages of antiquity, yet also a sublimation of *wen* as the highest organizing principle of the universe and of man. Literature, or rather *wen*, in all its manifestations and meanings, is nothing less than the visible manifestation of a cosmic organizing principle which, for Liu Xie, reveals itself in the Confucian classics. Therefore, it is said at the beginning of the chapter: "*Wen*, or pattern, is a very great virtue (*de* 德) indeed. It is born together with Heaven and Earth."¹¹

4. Early Chinese Poetry

What was regarded as literature in a narrower sense in the pre-Han period? Epics and tragedies as in ancient Greece did not exist in ancient China (and also not later); the most important literary medium was rather the lyric poetry as it was known in the form of the *shi*-诗 poem from the 10th to the 7th-6th century BC, found in the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 诗经), the latter canonized as a classic in the Han period. The early Chinese reflection on literature (and almost exclusively later) has, therefore, to be considered in relation to *shi*-poetry.

The earliest *shi*-poems in this Classic of Songs already possess many characteristics of what we perceive as typical Chinese poetry. They thus were in the highest degree formative for style and genre. As regarding their basic principles of form, style and content, the characteristics of these poems (especially those of the first and most important group in the *Book of Songs*, called "Folk Songs of the States" (*Guofeng* 国风), can be summarized as follows:

⁹ 心生而言立, 言立而文明. Vincent Yu-chung Shih (Transl.), *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons (bilingual edition)*, Hong Kong: Chinese UP 1983, p. 13.

¹⁰ 道沿圣以垂文, 圣因文而明道. Shih, *Literary Mind*, p. 19

¹¹ 文之为德而大矣, 与天地並生者何哉. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

- The shape of the poems is clearly structured and usually patterned with alternating rhyme; the lines usually have four characters per line and the stanzas consist of four or six lines.
- Often one can find phonetic means such doublings of adjectives, alliteration or onomatopoeia.
- In terms of content, we find service to the prince and to the ancestors, family life and the obligations therein as well as festivals and customs.
- Stylistically, the poems already show characteristics that are crucial to the whole history of Chinese poetry, that is, a way of brief and metaphorically suggestive expression – something is being said beyond the actual wording of the text (*yan wai* 言外).

A programmatic “Great Preface” (*shidaxu* 诗大序) existed for this classic of poetry since the Han period; it can be understood as the first text of literary theory in China.¹² From this preface it becomes clear that, at this early stage, poetry was seen primarily as a verbalization of moral and political disposition (*zhi* 志). This understanding changed from the 3rd-4th century AD on, when the call for expression of feelings (*qing* 情) as the purpose of poetry came to the fore. Also to be found in this preface is a remarkable statement that addresses the close relationship between literature and politics in China: The rulers used songs/poems to educate the people politically and morally; conversely, the songs of the people were used to criticize those in power. When this criticism was indirect and veiled, then the critics could not be blamed.

The *shi*-poem, however, is only one – albeit important – part of the entire corpus of *wen*, understood as literature in a broad sense. If we proceed historically (and if we disregard prose works such as the classics, the writings of the schools of philosophy, the history books, etc.), there was a major innovation about the 4th-3rd century BC in the form of a new genre, namely the so-called “Songs of Chu” (*Chuci* 楚辞)¹³. In contrast to the *shi*-poems that regionally belong to northern China, these new songs coming from the south seem far freer and looser, that is, rhythmically varied; also they are less strictly strophic in structure, but often very long. Its center piece, *Lisao*

¹² Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1992, p. 49. Siu-kit Wong (Ed.), *Early Chinese Literary Criticism*. Hong Kong 1983.

¹³ David Hawkes, *The Songs of the South*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

离骚 (Encounter with Suffering), is with more than 370 lines even the longest major poem in Chinese literary history. In terms of tone, the *Chuci* are melodic and often elegiac (hence the popular translation of their collective title as "Elegies of Chu" in Western languages). Also, we encounter a different world of symbolism of flowers and plants, of myths, gods and spirits that today, if at all, can hardly be understood anymore and that, because of its local shamanistic background, does not belong to the mainstream of China's cultural history. Ultimately, we have here not the expression of humans as social beings but the complex emotional world of man as an individual, for the *Songs of Chu* is a collection of songs that was written in part by one particular person, namely Qu Yuan 屈原 (at least in the case of *Lisao*). Other parts of this collection revolve around him and his fate, and this is the issue of a fair, but misjudged official, packaged in a shamanistic imagery associated with magical journeys. With Qu Yuan (c. 145 - c. 85 BC) thus occurs for the first time a person as a poet, whose fate was known or rather reflected in his poetry, and with whom one could identify.

In terms of literature, the ensuing Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD) also brought about a number of innovations. The historically most important genre among them is the "poetic description" also called: "rhymed prose" or "rhapsody" (*fu* 赋). On the one hand, these rhapsodies of the Han period are in the tradition of the *Songs of Chu*, on the other hand, they have their own character of both design and content. Regarding content and purpose, most of them possess a strong moralizing, didactic character.¹⁴ Stylistically, they are constructed in parallel verses in terms of number of syllables as well as syntactic and conceptual structure; in addition, they are known for their length and impersonal linguistic virtuosity.

Another new genre were the *Yuefu* 乐府 ballads. These were common folksongs among the people, partly collected by an imperial Music Office (*Yuefu*), but partly also created by officials of this office as, for example, new songs were required for sacrificial rituals. They were short in style, expressive and, as song, were more of a lyrical character, hence quite different from the *fu*. And they often had refrain and

¹⁴ David Knechtges, *The Han Rhapsody. A Study of the fu of Yang Hsiung*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976; Burton Watson, *Chinese Rhyme-Prose*, New York: Columbia UP 1971.

were – in clear contrast to the *shi*-poems – irregular in structure. They should become a popular literary genre for writers of later periods.

5. The Standing of Poetry in the Tang and Song Periods

During the Tang Dynasty (7th-10th century), poetry gained further in status. Especially, the regulated poem (*lüshi* 律诗), which is characterized by strict requirements for its formal design, became popular. The number of lines is restricted to eight, the characters per line to five or seven (with a caesura after the second or fourth character). Characters may not appear twice; grammatical auxiliary words, so-called empty characters, are to be avoided. Rhyme is mandatory. Antithetical parallelism is required for the third and fourth as well as for the fifth and sixth line. Finally, each character must follow a scheme of alternating even (*ping* 平) and uneven (*ze* 仄) tones. Through an elaborate system of compensation, violations against this scheme in one line can be balanced by corresponding changes in another. In this way, there is a regular, but musically varied sequence of words.¹⁵ The regulated poem, in which these features can be found, was the most modern at that time – hence it was called "poem in the new style" (*jin ti shi* 近体诗); it has been preserved as a popular form down to our modern times.

In spite of the many rules and prohibitions, the great poets of the Tang Dynasty moved in this new form so naturally and free, as if there would have been no restrictions for them at all. In particular, Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770) became the champion of the regulated poem. Li Bai 李白 (699-762, also known as Li T'ai-po 李太白) preferred less strict forms, such as the popular "poem in the old style" (*gu ti shi* 古体诗). These two poets are also representative of two different stand points and world views: Du Fu is the Confucian oriented poet who cares about the plight of the people and the fate of the country (*you guo you min* 忧国忧民); his regulated poems served for posterity as a storehouse from which one could derive rules and learn to write poetry. Li Bai, however, is the untrammelled Daoist artist genius who can only be admired, for the naturalness of his works is inimitable. Due to these outstanding poets as well as others, throughout Chinese literary history, poetry was mostly read

¹⁵ Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China*, München: Saur, 2007, p. 151ff.

and appreciated as a reflection of the personality of the poet, i.e. of a cultivated or fascinating character. Hence, there is a timelessly valid dictum: "Poetry is like the man" (*shi ru qi ren* 诗如其人)¹⁶. Through the works of these and other poets of the Tang Dynasty, poetry now rose to become a new aesthetic paradigm. Even more than the Confucian classics or the canonical histories, it became formative and, as it were, a cultural institution. Poetry became the epitome of literature and of cultural refinement.

From the Tang period on, we encounter new forms in the realm of poetry, most of all the so-called *ci*-词 song, which came from Central Asia and was practiced as a way of entertainment in the singing girls' milieu of the capital. Due to this origin, the contents of the *ci*-song at first had the reputation of being "unserious". In terms of form, the *ci* is close to the *yuefu* ballads, because, unlike the strictly regulated length of line in the *shi*-poems, the *ci*-song has verses and lines of different lengths. Since the original tunes were already lost in the Song Dynasty (10th-13th century), what was handed down in later times was only the formal framework, i.e. the lengths of line and verses as well as the tone pattern, called "melody" (*cipai* 词牌) which was mentioned in publications along with the title of the song. Several hundreds of such "melodies" existed, the features of which were kept in respective manuals. The *ci*-song should come to bloom in the Song Dynasty (following the Tang), but it is also cherished as a literary medium till today.

The Song Dynasty was a period of high urban civilization and belongs to the great epochs of Chinese culture. The major poet-literatus of the Song period was Su Shi 苏轼 (Su Dongpo 苏东坡, 1037-1101), one of the most prolific and influential literati in Chinese history in general. He not only opened up the field of *ci*-poetry beyond the content of love with singing girls and such to include philosophical or existential themes, he also excelled in all genres of poetry and prose and was known, apart from being a high official, as an expert calligrapher and painter. Other major poets were Mei Yaochen 梅尧臣 (1002–1060), Xin Qiji 辛弃疾 (1140–1207), Lu You 陆游 (1125–1209) as well as the best known Chinese female poet Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084–1151).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

6. Fictional Literature and Drama (Opera)

It goes without saying that a wealth of literature going beyond this narrow scope of poetry and philosophical prose (*wen*) can also be found in China, such as narrative prose (in the written classical and in colloquial language), drama, Buddhist and Daoist literature and more. I shall briefly only address the fictional prose and the drama. Already during the period between the Han and Tang Dynasties (3rd-7th century), there were stories in the style of so-called "records about the unusual" (*zhiguai* 志怪).¹⁷ This early narrative literature in the classical language (usually very short) was significantly influenced by established historiography. Such works emerged mostly as a kind of "unofficial history" (*waishi* 外史); therefore, they possess from their construction many features of historical records. Generally speaking, we can notice in China a close relationship between fictional prose and historiography, the latter being one of the major components of classical Chinese literacy. These fictional stories written in the classical language experienced an upswing in the Tang Dynasty as so-called "transmissions of curiosities" (*chuanqi* 传奇).

From the Song period on, and especially in the Ming period (14th-17th century), there was a flourishing of urban culture; accordingly we find accompanying innovations in the field of literature, namely in fiction: Colloquial novels and collections of short stories (*huaben* 话本 and *pinghua* 平话) developed, the latter mainly due to the work of Feng Menglong (1574-1645) as a collector and author. The Ming Dynasty brought forth four great novels (*xiaoshuo* 小说);¹⁸ but not only is their authorship in some cases unknown or disputed, their literary value was at that time only marginally an object of aesthetic considerations and discussions.¹⁹ One must also note that, despite the classification of these novels (today known as "Chapter Novels" *zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小说) as works in the colloquial language, the diction is still a mixture of vernacular and classical (also due to the frequent insertion of poems). Hence, without

¹⁷ Robert E. Hegel, "Traditional Chinese Fiction – The State of the Field", in: *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53/2 (1994), p. 394-426.

¹⁸ Wu Cheng'en 吴承恩 (c. 1506 – c. 1582): *Xiyou ji* 西游记 (*The Journey to the West*); Luo Guanzhong 罗贯中 (c. 1330–1400), *Sanguo yanyi* 三国演义 (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*); *Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅 (*The Golden Lotus*); Shi Nai'an 施耐庵 (ca. 1296–1372), *Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传 (*Water Margin*). See C.T. Hsia, *The Classical Chinese Novel*, New York, Columbia UP, 1968.

¹⁹ David L. Rolston (Ed.), *How to Read the Chinese Novel*. Princeton 1990.

a basic knowledge of classical Chinese these "colloquial" works cannot be understood. At that time, due to their "lower" status and linguistic quality, they received not much acknowledgement (one often recognizes the tradition of storytellers by stereotyped phrases such as at the end of a chapter: "If you want to know what happens next, you have to read the next chapter"). Today, however, these novels are being celebrated as milestones of an autochthonous narrative literary tradition.

In the subsequent Qing period (17th-20th century.), we have the most valued of all the novels of pre-modern China, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng* 红楼梦) by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1715-1763). This work has become highly significant not only because of the skillful psychological characterization of the countless characters but also, and especially so, because the whole aesthetic sensibilities of the educated class is reflected in this work.²⁰ In addition, the book contains numerous poems and a wealth of veiled puns, often hidden in names, and thus usually revealed only through repeated readings of the book. Ideologically, the book combines Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist views on life, where the accent is definitely on the latter, namely through the skillful device of revealing the illusory (empty – *kong* 空) nature of life by means of the plenteous description of its fullness (i.e. its lusts – *se* 色). Since the book is full of magic, it stands also in the tradition of the "transmissions of curiosities." In any case, one characteristic of Chinese fiction is (in stark contrast to the European tradition, tending towards realism) that the supernatural (and the incredible coincidence) plays a most important role.

The same applies to drama (*zaju* 杂剧) which emerged in the Mongol period (Yuan Dynasty, 13th-14th century).²¹ Although the term "drama" is established, more rightly it should be called "opera" as it was always sung. Here we also find content material (e.g. heroic tales) that have been recorded in the history books. Important for the understanding of the Chinese drama, however, is the wealth of sophisticated forms and rules. In its heyday (the Yuan Dynasty), there were – similarly to the regulated poem – a plethora of rules that had to be observed, so that the enjoyment of theater

²⁰ Its alternative title is: *The Story of the Stone*. Cao, Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone. A Chinese Novel*. 5 Vols. Transl. David Hawkes and John Minford. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973-1987.

²¹ Stephen H. West, "Drama", in: Nienhauser, William H. (Ed.), *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*. Vol. 1. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986, p. 13-30.

at that time could not have been something for everyone. Today it is assumed that this abundance of rules had the consequence that the theater of the Yuan period did not survive in its original form. In the subsequent Ming Dynasty, simpler forms emerged, mainly in southern China. The Peking Opera (*jingju* 京剧) of today, however, has preserved many elements from the original drama/opera.

It is important to note, however, that stories, novels and drama were, up to modern times, not considered as high literature; there were only isolated attempts to upgrade this "lower" tradition, such as by the unorthodox literatus Li Zhi 李贽 (1527-1602) at the end of the Ming Dynasty as well as by Jin Shengtan 金圣叹 (1610-1661) at the beginning of the Qing period.²² Just the failure of such attempts illustrate, however, how firmly established the tradition was, that is, its preference for the *shi*-poem and classical prose. Only modernity has brought about a change, which was accompanied also by an appreciation of unorthodox figures such as Li Zhi.

7. The Understanding of Literature in Chinese Modernity

A paradigm shift was brought about in modern China – less through the revolution of 1911 (with the abolishment of the Empire and the establishment of the Republic of China) but rather through the so-called May 4th Movement 五四运动 of 1919 (actually a movement for a new culture which lasted between 1915 and 1923). The Chinese intellectuals were alarmed by the continuing blows received from the imperialist and colonialist European powers in China. Taking traditional Confucian society as the main culprit – including its literary preferences – Confucianism and its traditional social order were consequently thrown on the garbage pile of history. Instead, European doctrines of all kinds became popular, especially Marxism after the October Revolution in Russia. During the May 4th Movement, first the classical literary language was subjected to criticism and abolished as a literary idiom in favour of the vernacular; then traditional literature was being re-evaluated, whereby the traditional order was turned upside down: Everything colloquial and fictional was considered to be superior. The pre-modern Chinese "chapter novel", however, with its schematic structure did not stand the test of comparison with the newly discovered realistic

²² Rolston, *How to Read the Chinese Novel*.

novel translated from European languages (except for “The Dream of the Red Chamber”). The Western import model was thought to be far superior and was, in addition, understood as an engine of social change; hence it became the new standard of literature. A similar innovation represented the spoken drama which had not existed in this form in China previously and was also imported from Europe. One could characterize the paradigm shift of the early 20th century thus: A literary sensibility trained on poetic criteria now orienting itself towards the novel, the short story and the drama which, in fact, were foreign literary imports; and hence, we have now a Western foreign (or modern or universal?) standard of literature in China.

A further characteristic of the modern Chinese understanding of literature is a feature that is already prefigured in the traditional connection between literature and Confucian doctrine, that is, a close relationship between literature and politics. Beginning with the May 4th Movement, literature should serve primarily the purpose of criticizing political and social conditions and, accordingly, promote social change. This development intensified by the actions of the colonial powers in China, especially Japan (in imitation of European imperialism), and by the repressive politics of the Guomindang government under Chiang Kai-shek against the Communists. In the 1930s a "league of left writers" was formed (led by Lu Xun 鲁迅, 1881-1936, the most important writer of modern China), which – despite the persecution of its members by the Guomindang government – dominated the literary scene. In the areas controlled by the Communists (Yan'an), however, Mao Zedong in 1942 convened a "Forum on Literature and Art" (在延安文艺座谈会) which put a tighter rein on literature than the Guomindang government ever attempted: According to Mao, literature hereafter should – in the sense of Lenin – serve as a “cog and screw” in the “revolutionary machinery”. As these views became the new orthodoxy with the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 literature was henceforth a handmaid of politics.

It is indicative of the relationship between literature and politics in the 65-year history of the People's Republic of China, that a critique campaign against a Peking Opera in the traditional form, written in 1965 by Wu Han and focusing on a historical figure

from the Ming period, *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* (*Hai Rui ba guan* 海瑞罢官)²³, formed the prelude to the biggest catastrophe of modern China: the Cultural Revolution. After its end and the death of Mao in 1976, literature in the strict sense begins to gain form again with a focus both on the wounds the Cultural Revolution brought about and on trying again, as previously in the Mai 4th Movement, to tie standards up to Western knowledge and Western literary developments. Meanwhile, from modernism through “magical realism” (à la Márquez) to Postmodernism (including post-structuralism and post-colonialism, and much more), almost everything Western has been received, but a specific Chinese understanding of literature still remains to be formulated and seen. Recent trends show a mixed picture: On the one hand, the impression prevails that one wants to catch up with and adjust to the lower standards of literature in the West. So young (often female) writers, such as Wei Hui 卫慧 (*1973) and Mian Mian 棉棉 (*1970), demand in their novels, as it were, sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll as universal achievements also for China, or, in other words, here literature is primarily understood as a break with traditional taboos and thus seen under the prospects of becoming bestsellers – with their authors being touted at the same time by their Western publishers (having already become well known in the West) as the “voice of young China”.²⁴

On the other hand, a writer such as Nobel Laureate of 2000, Gao Xingjian 高行健 (*1940), now living in France (and politically ostracized in his home country), tries to explore the traditional Chinese culture in disappearance, for example, in his book *Soul Mountain* (*Lingshan* 灵山), a fascinating hybrid of traditional travelogue, Western stream of consciousness and a frame of mind derived from Zen Buddhism – at the same time keeping a completely apolitical stance. Poetry as the central form in pre-modern China, has also regained in format, such as by poets like Bei Dao 北岛 (*1949), Yang Lian 杨炼 (*1955) and many others (the two mentioned also now live abroad). But although there might be a few variances to modern Western poetry, as in reference to certain traditional elements, the differences to Western poetry are hardly perceptible. It seems that modern Chinese poetry has successfully separated

²³ The play by Wu Han used the established device of criticizing the present (Mao's dismissal of Peng Dehuai) through the past (Hai Rui's dismissal).

²⁴ This let Wolfgang Kubin, Professor of Chinese Literature at Bonn University, to his much debated remark: “All modern Chinese literature is rubbish!” For the reaction, see Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “Ties That Blind”, in: *South China Morning Post*, 21.01.2007, p. 5; <http://www.scmp.com/article/579045/ties-blind>.

from its origin and finally arrived in the West (or Western culture has made it to China). Quite a few of today's intellectuals, however, have maintained the practice of poetry writing in the classical form of the *shi*-poem. It is a condensed poetry of a special kind which, much like the Japanese *haiku*, through the form provides a rigor and discipline that is considered to be a challenge. Even the authoritative creator of the modern prose poem (and symbolist short stories), the already mentioned Lu Xun, had chosen the form of the *shi*-poem for his most private thoughts and expressions. And none other than Mao Tse-tung himself wrote in the *shi*-form as well as in the style of *ci*-songs, condemned in his time as "feudal" (he prescribed his people to only write poetry in the vernacular language...). Whether this preference, however, indicates a concept of literature over the times in China, is another question and one we will not attempt to answer here.

8. Chinese Literature in the Context of World Literature

Against this backdrop, let us now examine briefly how this complex history of Chinese literature is being represented in a current Western anthology and if its treatment does justice to a Chinese understanding of literature. As already mentioned, the anthology consulted is the *Norton Anthology of World Literature* which is advertised on its internet site as "the most-trusted anthology of World Literature available"²⁵. For this collection, also a well-known specialist of Chinese literature was involved: Stephen Owen of Harvard University served on its editorial board.

As the *Norton Anthology* covers religious and philosophical texts from all over the world, Vol. A (part III: Early Chinese Literature and Thought) also includes extracts of the major Chinese philosophical prose, such as the Confucian *Analects* (*Lunyu* 论语), as well as parts of the Daoist classics *Daodejing* 道德经 and *Zhuangzi* 庄子. In addition, and on quite a smaller scale, pieces of the important historiographical writing, such as by the famous Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian 司马迁 (c. 145 – 86 BC), are included. In terms of poetry of this period, we find a few poems from the classic *Book of Songs* as well as from the *Songs of Chu*. In a special section on "Speech, Writing, and Poetry" we find the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Songs* as an important early programmatic statement about the relevance of poetry. This coverage,

²⁵ Here is a table of contents: http://media.wwnorton.com/cms/contents/NAWOL_TOC_new.pdf

which includes the important philosophical and historiographical (not fictional!) prose (*wen*) as well as poetry, appears comprehensive and plausible for the early period of Chinese thought.

Vol. B (part III: Medieval Chinese Literature) has sections on “Hermits, Buddhists, and Daoists”, “Tang Poetry” as well as “Literature about Literature”. In this part, many important Chinese authors are covered, but specialists on Chinese literature will also encounter some oddities. In the section “Hermits” we find (in this order) three poems from Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263), excerpts from Liu Yiqing’s 刘义庆 (403–444) prose work *New Tales from an Account of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世说新语), many poems from the Buddhist poet Hanshan 寒山 (9th cent.) as well as representative poems and prose by Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (or Tao Qian 陶潜, 365–427). In this collection, though, we see how Western predilections determine what is considered to be World Literature today. For the Chinese, the Tang Dynasty Buddhist figure Hanshan, of whose life and background little is known, is not recognized as a major poet. Apparently, he was more appreciated in the Zen Buddhist tradition of Japan from where he was discovered by rebellious American poets in the middle of the 20th century, that is to say, by the Beat Generation poet Gary Snyder (who was one of his earliest translators into English) as well as by Jack Kerouac who (on the advice of Snyder) even dedicated his book *The Dharma Bums* (1958) to Hanshan. Thus we have here Western (American) preferences determining the contents of this book – something which should not be surprising, though, considering that we have here an *American Anthology of World Literature*.

Equally odd is what we find in the section on “Tang Poetry”, after all the golden age of Chinese literature. With many poems by four great poets of this period, Wang Wei 王维 (699-759), Li Bai, Du Fu and Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846), this age of great poetry is well represented. But then we get shorter prose works by Han Yu 韩愈 (768–824), Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819) and Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831) (“The Story of Yingying”, *Yingying zhuan* 莺莺传) as well as, finally, again a couple of *ci*-songs, now by the best-known female poet of the Chinese past, Li Qingzhao who, however, did not live in the Tang but in the Song period. It is of course a must, according to today’s Western standards, to also cover female authors in such anthologies (although, in terms of reception, they did not play an important role, in fact just as little as female

writers did in pre-modern Western history). What is bewildering, though, is that Li Qingzhao is the only representative of the rich epoch of Song Dynasty literature (neither the eminent Su Dongpo, nor Xin Qiji, Lu You or any other poet of this period is mentioned), and this in a section which is called “Tang Poetry”.

The section “Literature about Literature” has excerpts from Cao Pi’s 曹丕 (187-226) “Discourse on Literature” (*Dianlun lunwen* 典论论文) and Lu Ji’s 陆机 (261-303) “Exposition on Literature” (*Wen fu* 文赋), but then it includes parts of Wang Xizhi’s 王羲之 (303-361) “Preface to the Collection of the Orchid Pavilion Poems” (*Lanting xu* 兰亭序) which is rightly famous in Chinese history both for its content and for the calligraphy with which it was written, but not as a piece of writing about literature. What is missing in this section is a reference to the greatest work of Chinese literary criticism of all periods: Liu Xie’s *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*.

We encounter China again in Vol. C (part III: East Asian Drama): None of the formative dramas of the Yuan Dynasty, however, is included here, only excerpts of *The Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan* 桃花扇) by Kong Shangren 孔尚任 (1648-1718) of the Qing period. Vol D (part II: Early Modern Chinese Literature) has excerpts from Wu Cheng’en’s 吴承恩 (c. 1506 – c. 1582) novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西游记), one short-story by Feng Menglong 冯梦龙 (1574-1645), “The Courtesan’s Jewel Box” (*Du Shiniang nu chen baiyuxiang* 杜十娘怒沉百宝箱) and parts from Cao Xueqin’s famous novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*The Story of the Stone*). Vol. E (part II: Culture and Empire: Vietnam, India, China) has small parts of Liu E’s 刘鹗 (Liu Tiejun 刘铁云, 1857-1909) *Travels of Laocan* (*Laocan youji* 老残游记), a novel from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century which however, apart from specialists, has not attracted much attention. Finally, we have bits and pieces of China again in Vol. F: Part I (Modernity and Modernism, 1900-1945) has two stories by Lu Xun, “Diary of a Madman” (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日记) and “Medicine” (*Yao* 药), as well as a story each by Lao She 老舍 (1899-1966) and Zhang Ailing (1920-1995) 张爱玲 (Eileen Chang). Part II (Postwar and Postcolonial Literature: 1945-1968) has in the sub-section “Manifestos” Chen Duxiu’s 陈独秀 (1879-1942) article “On Literary Revolution” (*Wenxue geming lun* 文学革命论) that appeared, however, already in 1917 (!). And as a last entry in part III (Contemporary World Literature) we find: “The

Old Gun” (*Laoqiang baodao* 老枪宝刀) by Mo Yan 莫言 (*1955), the 2012 Nobel Laureate of Literature.

The questions arise: Is this coverage adequate? Are masterpieces, according to a Chinese standard, well represented? And is the collection representative for a Chinese understanding (or concept) of literature? The answer would be a definitive yes and no. It is clear that an anthology like this has to make difficult choices. In focusing in the first volumes on classical prose (*wen*) and poetry – from antiquity (*Book of Songs*, *Songs of Chu*) to the great poets of later times, Ruan Ji and Tao Yuanming as well as to four great Tang poets – the collection gives justice to the great achievement of classical Chinese literature both in the form of prose and poetry. That the rich and innovative poetry of the Song Dynasty (also its new genre, the *ci*-song) is only treated marginally with the inclusion of a few poems by Li Qingzhao, dismissing, though, a towering figure such as Su Dongpo, is not an adequate representation of Chinese literature. It could be compared with, for example, leaving out Goethe when trying to present an overview of German literature.

The later parts of Chinese literature included in the anthology are only novels, short stories and drama, thus illustrating a relatively late Chinese literary preference: It is the new concept formed at the beginning of the 20th century around the May 4th Movement, which in fact is an adoption of Western standards.

And here we may return again to the defining Western understanding of literature as fiction, i.e. novels and drama. Although disputed, this view still appears to be dominant among critics and comparatists. After all, this understanding was already formative when Goethe initially coined the idea of World Literature. Goethe appears to have been very much interested in China; for example, during the years 1813-16, he read everything that he could find about China in the library of Weimar. He was even acquainted with the intricacies of the Chinese language and writing system (through the help of the Sinologist Julius von Klaproth; in fact, he was proud to be able to demonstrate Chinese writing to the princesses in Weimar). But Goethe, unfortunately, knew very little about Chinese literature.²⁶ He had read Du Halde’s

²⁶ For an overview, see Katharina Mommsen, “Goethe und China in ihren Wechselbeziehungen”, in Günther Debon and Adrian Hsia (Eds.), *Goethe und China – China und Goethe*, Bern: Peter Lang, 1985, p. 15-36; David Damrosch, *What is World Literature*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003, p. 1-36.

standard *Description...de la Chine*²⁷ which included a few poems from the *Book of Songs*, but most influential in Du Halde's book was the translation of the play "The Orphan of Zhao" (*Zhao shi gu er*). It was a time when in Europe the theater (tragedies and comedies) dominated the literary scene, it was also the height of the epoch of *Chinoiserie*. Not surprisingly, the translated play soon became common knowledge to Europeans, was retranslated by Voltaire and we find its plot structure reappearing in Goethe's "Elpenor" fragment. Apart from this Chinese drama, considered by the Chinese as literature of a lower standard, Goethe read a few novels and stories, likewise not literature of high standard for Chinese at his time; he even (erroneously) assumed that the Chinese exceeded the Europeans in writing such novels. The content of these stories opened up for him the world of Confucian morality, modesty and good manners, something that he very much appreciated in his old age. (Daoism and Buddhism remained unknown to him.) It was at this point – the period of his latest preoccupation with China in the years 1824-27 and his reading Chinese novels – that Goethe formulated his famous idea of "World Literature".

As to poetry, the most esteemed sort of literature and that which reached the highest standing in China, he hardly knew anything of substantial nature. Apart from the few songs from the *Book of Songs*, he was acquainted with a collection of poems describing beautiful women of the Chinese past, translated by the Englishman Peter Perring Thoms (*Chinese Courtship*) which he read at the age of 75 in a – probably very stimulating – English-Chinese bilingual edition and of which he retranslated four songs. Considering that this limited encounter inspired him also to his late collection of "The Chinese-German Book of Seasons and Hours" ("Chinesisch-deutsche Jahres- und Tageszeiten", 1829) in which we find some of the intricacies of Chinese poetry at work, we get an inkling that Goethe might have even grasped some of the essence of Chinese poetry, such as the concentration on one scene, the sparseness of expression and the fusion of feelings (*qing* 情) with scenery (*jing* 景).

²⁷ The English edition (in 4 vols.) appeared as, Jean Baptiste Du Halde, *The General History of China: containing a geographical, historical, chronological, political and physical description of the empire of China, Chinese-Tartary, Corea, and Thibet ; including an exact and particular account of their customs, manners, ceremonies, religion, arts and sciences* (3rd ed.), London: J. Watts, 1741. The original edition can be viewed here: <http://www.archive.org/stream/generalhistoryof01duha#page/n3/mode/2up>.

But he never read the truly great poets of China, Du Fu, Li Bai, Wang Wei or Su Dongpo. Bearing in mind, though, that in 1814 he discovered Persian poetry, i.e. the poet Hafez (ca. 1325 - ca. 1390), an encounter which inspired him to one of his major poetic works, the *West-Eastern Diwan*, one can only deplore that he lacked a better acquaintance with Chinese poetry. What heights might have been reached had he been able to read, let's say, Du Fu or Li Bai? But such is history. We can only fancy what would have come out of, for example, an encounter and discussion of Socrates and Confucius – an imagined meeting of minds which, after all, inspired François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon (1651-1715) to one of his famous *Dialogues of the Dead*.²⁸

The place of poetry in a concept of World Literature is a very special one. For other than fiction, a true appreciation of poetry in translation is not possible. Too much of its fascination depends on the respective form, and this is especially so in the case of Chinese poetry where we not only have a written language which is incomparable to European languages, but also a wealth of formal features unknown in any other national poetry. Hence it is rightly said that “poetry gets lost in translation”²⁹. The Chinese appreciated and excelled in this form of literature to such an extent that they regarded any other form as a far lower standard. But when we read it in translation, we can only appreciate it as adaptations, that is, as summaries of its content. And yet, in spite of this limitation, the reading of Chinese poetry in translation must have exerted quite a fascination on the Western reader – as it did with Goethe and as it still does today. We might fathom its allure to European readers from the great symphonic work *The Song of the Earth (Das Lied von der Erde)* by Gustav Mahler, to which he was stirred by reading poor adaptations of six poems of the Tang period (Li Bai, Wang Wei and others). Although the German translations that are the basis for Mahler's work are gross distortions of the originals, they inspired him to one of his most sublime works. If the reading of poetry even in inadequate translations and adaptations still can lead to such a meeting of minds and creative outbursts, then we can truly lament the fact that Goethe never got a chance to read Li Bai or Du Fu.

²⁸ Fénelon, *Dialogues des Morts et Fables, écrits composés pour l'éducation du duc de Bourgogne*, Paris 1700, 1712. In fact, Fénelon's dialogue, siding more toward the Greek philosopher, is a critique of contemporary sinophiles.

²⁹ Stephen Owen, Stephen Owen, “What is World Poetry – The Anxiety of Global Influence”, *The New Republic*, Nov. 12, 1990, p. 28.30