Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literary Criticism –

From the Pre-Modern into the Modern Period

Karl-Heinz Pohl, Trier

The term literary criticism has a double meaning in English: literary theory and criticism of literature. Between the two, the line is not always clearly drawn as works of criticism can refer to actual works (reviews thereof) and, at the same time, attempt to expound fundamental insights into the essence of literature. This is also true in China where we have, additionally, the exacting circumstance that critical works often are works of literature in their own right, as poems, rhyme-prose or parallel-prose. In the long cultural history of China, a critical practice and theoretical concepts emerged that had a great impact on views of literature in general. Considering that Chinese modernity is not even one hundred years old (if we take the May Fourth Period of 1919 as its starting point), it can be safely assumed that some of these ideas are still valid today. The concept of modernity, however, is still a subject of great debate – from the question of what characterizes modernity, content wise, examining the notion of multiple (and thus also a Chinese) modernity, up to the distinction between modern and postmodern. Hence, I will use the term "modern" regarding China in a strictly chronological sense, that is, in contrast to "imperial China", as the period after 1912.

1. The Pre-Modern Period

1.1. The Concept of Literature in Pre-Modern China

The natural sciences and humanities possess a universalistic claim. As a rule, one tries to find theories and principles that are universally valid and do not give much space to exceptions. But, most of all, the sciences and humanities are a European invention. And thus there is an inclination to define concepts and categories on the basis of specifically European tradition, according to European (also American) preferences. But Western style modernity is only the continuation of a long *local* cultural tradition, and literary studies are only one part of this Eurocentric academic endeavour. For example, a modern concept of literature, prevalent in Europe/America, regards Homer's epics and Greek tragedies as the beginning of literature which culminates in the modern novel and drama; hence, it emphasises fictionality as the quintessence of literature. The *belles-lettres* is likewise a European invention that occurred rather late (18th century). Looking at literature from an earlier understanding, it is, first of all, "written word" (Latin: *letterae* – the letters); and thus the pre-modern understanding of literature tended to be less "fine writing", as in *belles-lettres*, but leaned much more towards scholarship. That is, the object of literary studies was a thorough acquaintance with the whole written tradition.

Seen from this perspective, there would be a parallel to Chinese literature: Although we don't find a predilection for epos and drama – instead it was poetry that figured prominently as the top literary genre – we have in China with the important notion of *wen* 文(writing) an equivalent to the pre-modern European concept of literature. In the modern colloquial combinations of *wenxue* 文學 (literally: study of writing) or *wenzhang* 文章 (literary article), the character *wen* refers to literature in a comprehensive sense. Etymologically speaking, *wen* means a pattern of crossed lines. In the classical Zhou period (11th – 3rd cent. BC), this led to the meaning of *wen* as literary pattern and rhetorical embellishment – i.e. a beautiful exterior in contrast to substance or inner qualities (*zhi* 質). Later on, *wen* would acquire the meaning of formally crafted literature (prose as well as poetry and other literary forms with rhyme or in parallel prose) – in contrast to prose used solely for official purposes which was called *bi* 筆 (brush). Another important dimension of meaning in the character *wen* is a civil and cultural one (as in the modern word *wenhua* 文化– culture, as opposed to *wu* 武– martial). Hence, the character *wen* entails an aesthetic as well as a cultivating, educational aspect.

Wen came into usage as the meaning of "literature" only in the Han Dynasty, then referring to the classics, as well as to the writing of history that began in this period. In terms of literature, in the sense of consciously formed writing, the most important medium or genre was the *shi*-poem 詩 as it was transmitted from the 11th to the 6th century BC in the important classic *Book of Songs* (*shi jin*g 诗经). Early reflection on literary ideas and value was almost exclusively concerned with this kind of poetry, such as in the influential "Great Preface" to the *Book of Songs*. The poems collected in this classic already possessed the typical features of later day Chinese poetry such as brevity, conciseness, and a highly allusive and suggestive diction using nature metaphors. It would become the primary medium of expression for the Chinese literati, and with its greatest protagonists such as Li Bai 李白; and Du Fu 杜甫 (in the 8th cent.) it became – as the greatest literary contribution of China – part of world literature.

Chronologically speaking, after the emergence of the *shi*-poetry (which was very much a northern genre), we encounter in and around the ancient state of Chu 楚 in the 4th-3rd century BC a peculiarly southern kind of poetry, the so-called "Songs of Chu" (*Chuci* 楚辭). The Songs of Chu mark a transition in the history of Chinese literature, as for the first time we find here, particularly in the longest and most important of these songs, the *Lisao* 離騷 (Encountering Sorrow), a person as a poet – Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340 BC - 278 BC) – whom, because of his fate as a loyal but critical minister, literati of later generations liked to identify with. After this, we have in the Han period the rhapsodies or rhyme-prose (*fu* 賦), which have a lot in common with the *Chuci*, as well as the *yuefu* 樂府 folksongs (or ballads). Only much later, in the Song Dynasty (10th-13th cent.), a new form of poetry (*ci*-songs 詞) was added to the canon. Vernacular literature (novels and plays) also emerged in this period, but never gained the same acceptance among the literati as poetry did.

Representative for the pre-modern understanding of *wen* as literature is the beginning of Liu Xie's 劉勰(465-522 AD) monumental *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍), the most thorough treatise on all aspects of literature from the 6th cent. AD, with the title "On the Origin: the *Dao*" (*Yuan dao* 原道). Here, the character *wen* is given a most comprehensive significance – as pattern, form, culture, civilization as well as literature. First of all, Liu Xie alludes to the cosmological dimension of *wen*: understood in its basic meaning as "pattern", *wen* is the pattern of the universe, such as the heavenly bodies and features (sun, moon, stars, clouds etc.) as well as the formations on earth

(mountains, rivers, plants, flowers); hence he calls these formations "pattern of the *Dao*" (*dao zhi wen* 道之文). Liu Xie emphasizes the natural organization of these patterns:

> The sculptured colors of clouds surpass paintings in their beauty, and the blossoms of plants depend on no embroiderers for their marvellous grace. Can these features be due to external adornment? No, they are all natural (*ziran* 自然).[1]

Juxtaposed to this natural pattern of the universe is the human mind (*xin* 心) which is revealed in *wen* as writing/literature, for "with the emergence of mind, language is created, and when language is created, writing appears."[2] And he asks:

> Now if things which are devoid of consciousness express themselves so extremely decoratively, can that which is endowed with mind lack a pattern proper to itself?[3]

Therefore he concludes, "words with pattern (*yan zhi wen* 言之文) [i.e. literature] indeed express the mind of the universe (*tian di zhi xin* 天地之心)."[4]

Lastly, Liu Xie discerns in *wen* an additional meaning as the cultivating teachings of the sages of old, particularly of Confucius. Because of their cultural achievements "we know that *Dao* is handed down in writing through sages, and that sages make *Dao* manifest in their writing."[5]

Thus we have here a grand analogy which encompasses human beings, the sages and the entire universe; at the same time, it is an apotheosis of *wen* as the highest structuring principle of the cosmos *and* of man. Literature, or better *wen* in all its multifaceted meanings, is for Liu Xiu nothing less than the formation of a cosmic principle of order and structure that manifests itself in the Confucian classics. Hence he writes at the beginning of this first chapter: "*Wen*, or pattern, is a great virtue indeed. It is born together with heaven and earth."[6]

Much later, the Confucian context of *wen* was further strengthened through Neo-Confucian thought, beginning in the 10th century. Zhou Dunyi (周敦頤, 1017-1073 AD), one of the earliest Neo-Confucian masters, expressed the idea that "literature is supposed to carry the [Confucian moral] 'Way'" (*wen yi zai dao* 文以載道). This didactical concept of literature, as part of the Confucian orthodoxy, became most influential for the last millennium of imperial China.

1.2. Criticism in Pre-Modern Times

What were criticism and literary theory like in pre-modern times? First of all, early criticism focused on questions of forms or classification of writing. We find a formative discussion of genres in the period between Han and Tang, culminating in Liu Xie's *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*. But this is only one aspect of early criticism. In most works we also find a probing into the essence of literary artistic expression and creativity. Interestingly, this was often done through the medium of poetry, that is, we have poems about poetry (or literature), such as Lu Ji's 陸機 influential "Rhapsody on Literature" (*Wen fu* 文賦). Also Liu Xie's *Literary Mind* is not just a discursive work on literature as, let's say, Aristotle's *Poetics*; it is, much rather, a work with a most artistic diction (of parallel prose) as well as structure

[1] Vincent Yu-chung Shih (trans.), *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, Hong Kong 1983, p. 12-13.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Shih, p. 14-15.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Shih, p. 18-19.
[6] Shih, p. 12-13.

(symmetry according to the *Yin-Yang* pattern). Later on, particularly beginning with the Song period (10th – 13th cent.), we find critical literature in the form of impressionistic remarks and aphorisms, so-called "poetry talks" (*shihua* 詩話).

Let us begin not with theoretical concepts, but with the actual practice of criticism. Three characteristics concerning pre-modern Chinese criticism can be singled out: 1. a focus on the person – his "intention" (*zhi* 志) or his "individual temperament" (*qi* 氣), instead of focussing on the work itself; 2. greater esteem of past authors as compared to contemporaries; 3. an inclination towards subjectivity and bias. As shall later become clear, these characteristics have – in some way or other – survived the transition of Chinese literature into modernity.

In pre-modern China, we find a peculiar unity of ethics and aesthetics. Literary works were considered to be a reflection of the moral qualities of their writers; therefore, we find already quite early the tendency to focus on the person – on the author or artist and his intention (*zhi*) – rather than on the work, as constituting a main characteristic of traditional literary and art criticism. Thus we have the popular saying, "Literature is like the person" (*wen ru qi ren* 文如其人). This tendency goes back to some of the earliest comments on literature, such as the saying, "Poetry expresses intention [of the person/author]" (*shi yan zhi* 詩言志) from the *Book of Documents* 書經, which, paraphrased in the "Great Preface" of the *Book of Songs* 詩經, became one of the most important concepts in Chinese literature. We encounter similar statements about the close connection between writing and personality throughout the history of Chinese literature in countless variations.

At the end of the Han period, we have one of the earliest texts of literary criticism: Cao Pi's 曹丕（187－226 AD）*Dianlun lunwen* 典論：論文 (Canonical Discussions – On Literature). Cao Pi holds the view that, "in literature, *qi* (the individual temperament of the author) is the most important thing" (*wen yi qi wei zhu* 文以氣為主)[7]. This is just another way of expressing the predilection of focusing on the personality of the author.

Moreover, in Cao Pi's *Dianlun Lunwen* we encounter the first attempt of literary criticism in the mode of character criticism. Here is an example:

> Ying Yang has harmony, but no force. Liu Zhen's style has force but suffers from looseness. Kong Rong is by nature noble and sublime, and in that he passes contemporaries; but he is incapable of sustained argument, his logic being weaker than his rhetoric; as for his writings in which there is an admixture of elements of mockery and jest, surely, in them he is on a par with Yang Xiong and Ban Gu.[8]

Here we see clearly that literary qualities are expressed as personal qualities. Two hundred years later, we have in Zhong Rong's (鍾嶸 468-518 AD) *Shipin* 詩品 (Grades of Poetry) the first work which, according to its title, was directed towards the evaluation of poetry; in fact however, it also falls into the category of character criticism for it is first of all an evaluation of poets (*renpin* 人品).

Hence, the evaluation of character became common practice in the rating of poetry and art. Much later, in the Ming period, through the efforts of Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568-1610 AD) and his brothers of the so-called Gongan-school (*gong an pai* 公安派), another term entered the discussion about personal traits of the author: *xingling* 性靈 (individual sensibility). With

[7] Siu-kit Wong, *Early Chinese Literary Criticism*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1983, p. 21, 169.
[8] Wong, p. 20.

the popularity of this term we can observe – in contrast to views that emphasize traditional patterns and Confucian didactic ideals – a new focus on the expressive qualities of the individual author.

The following passage from the late Qing critic Liu Xizai 劉熙載 (1815 - 1881) on calligraphy, in his *Yigai* 藝概 (Outline of the Arts), shows that this view – to take the work of art as a means to see the character of the artist – remained popular for two thousand years:

> To write (*shu* 書) means "to be like (*ru* 如)": It is like the writer's scholarship (*xue* 學), like his talent (*cai* 才), like his intentions (*zhi* 誌), in short, like the person himself and nothing less.[9]

Although this saying is directed towards calligraphy it can be equally applied to works of literature.

A second characteristic of traditional Chinese criticism is that it is chiefly preoccupied with the great poets and artists of the past. The aim is to see their faces and to befriend them through their works. In the book of *Mencius* there is already a passage which recommends that one should make friends with the ancient worthies through their literary documents:

> When a scholar feels that his friendship with all the virtuous scholars of the kingdom is not sufficient to satisfy him, he proceeds to ascend to consider the men of antiquity. He repeats their poems, and reads their books, and as he does not know what they were as men, to ascertain this, he considers their history. This is to ascend and make friends of the men of antiquity.[10]

The orientation towards the past, as is well known, characterizes Confucian thinking in general. This tendency has been criticized as early as the Han Dynasty by the skeptic Wang Chong 王充 (27 - 101). In his *Lun Heng* 論衡 he remarks:

> The ordinary scholars explaining omens are prone to magnify antiquity and detract from the present. [...] They trust in falsehoods, provided they be old and far away, and they despise truth, in case it be near and modern.[11]

We can pursue this particular trait throughout the history of Chinese literature. In his important critical text "On the Origins of Poetry" (*Yuan shi* 原詩), the Qing dynasty scholar Ye Xie 葉燮 writes that one is able to see the faces of the ancient poets – mainly Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365-427), Du Fu, Li Bai, Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) and Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101) – through their writings. As to his contemporaries, however, he writes:

> I have read the poetry collections of several well-known writers of recent times from beginning to the end, and always found the poems to be good work; but reading them over several times, I never could make out what their faces looked like. I don't think that this is how a real author should be.[12]

Hence, even as late as the Qing dynasty, one can clearly notice a tendency to debase contemporaries and to esteem writers of old.

---

[9] Liu Xizai 劉熙載, *Yigai* 藝概, Shanghai 1978, p. 170.

[10] *Mencius* V.B 8.2; Legge, *Classics*, II, p.392.

[11] Wang Chong, *Lun Heng*, "Xu song"; quoted according to Guo Shaoyu 郭紹虞, *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan* 中國歷代文論選, Shanghai: Guji chubanshe 1979, Vol. I, p. 164; Alfred Forke (trans.), *Lun Heng*, London 1907 - 1911, v. II, p. 226.

[12] Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP 1992, p. 577.

There is finally a third tendency in early Chinese literary criticism: to hold subjective or biased views. Already Cao Pi criticized the inclination of his contemporaries to value one's own works higher than those of others. He explains it with the following observations:

> It has been the case from the ancient past that men of letters hold another in scorn (*wenren xiang qing* 文人相輕) [...] The truth is that it is easy for us to see the particular merits in ourselves and that, while literature encompasses a variety of styles, few writers are equally accomplished in all of them; as a result, what is one's own forte often becomes grounds on which one levels attacks on fellow-writers gifted in other ways. A common saying has it that the oldest broom in one's own household is worth a thousand pieces of gold. The disparagement of others proceeds from imperfect knowledge of oneself. [...] Men of average intelligence are given to treasuring what comes from afar and regarding what comes from nearby with contempt; turning their back on facts, they bow to reputations. They are also prone to making the mistake of over-rating themselves out of benighted self-ignorance.[13]

Cao Pi here criticizes the wide-spread blindness to one's own short-comings. Lack of self-criticism apparently leads many people to view their own works, although possibly – so his metaphor – just like a broom with only a few hairs left, as more valuable than someone else's.

Liu Xie, in his chapter on the "Understanding Critic" (*Zhiyin* 知音), from his most comprehensive early study of all aspects of literature, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, quotes approvingly Cao Pi's saying that "men of letters hold another in scorn" (*wenren xiang qing*) and elaborates on the mentioned tendency to hold subjective or biased views. He writes:

> Our knowledge tends to be one-sided; no one has been able to be perfectly comprehensive. Men full of feelings (*kangkai* 慷慨) [...] all recite with admiration what suits their taste, but discard that which does not meet with their approval. Each holds fast to his bias, and wants it to be the measure of all changes.[14]

In its deep insight into human psychology, Cao Pi's and Liu Xie's critique on this form of literary criticism has even today not lost its relevance. Moreover, it is fair to say that this last characteristic is not only confined to traditional Chinese criticism but appears to be a universal – traditional *and* modern – phenomenon.

Generally speaking and summing up, early Chinese criticism is more author- and less work-orientated. The ultimate object for the reader was the heart and mind of the author. Hence, the reader was supposed to be "one who knows the music" (*zhi yin* 知音), that is: an understanding friend. Liu writes about the relationship between author and reader in the same chapter, the title of which (*Zhiyin*) alludes to this type of "understanding critic":

> The writer's first experience is his inner feeling, which he then seeks to express in words. But the reader, on the other hand, experiences the words first, and then works himself into the feeling of the author. If he can trace the waves back to their source, there will be nothing, however dark and hidden, that will not be revealed to him. Although the life of an age may have passed beyond our view, we may often, through reading its literature, succeed in grasping the heart of it.[15]

---

[13] Guo, I, p.158; Wong, p. 19.
[14] Shih, p. 507 (with modifications).
[15] Shih, p. 509.

In this remarkable passage, the process of aesthetic reception by the reader is being seen as exactly the opposite as the process of creation by the artist. This means, on the one hand, that a close reading allows the reader in the process of reception to re-experience the process of creation; on the other hand, it is the goal of the reader – and an essential part of his aesthetic enjoyment – to see the heart (*xin* 心) of the author. And because in Chinese tradition, the heart represents not only the emotional, but also the cognitive, and the moral center of a person, this view of things implies in the first place an evaluation of the person (*ren* 人) and not so much of his writing (*wen*). Hence, the *intersubjective* relationship between author and reader is of prime importance for traditional Chinese critics.

1.3. "Theoretical" Concepts

In the Chinese literary tradition, we don't have any theoretical concepts in the modern sense of "theory"; and yet we have, throughout Chinese history, a number of notions that served as guiding ideas for the writing of literature (mostly poetry). A first point in traditional Chinese literary thought is the value of "suggestiveness" as a poetic quality in a work. In poetry itself, this quality can be observed in a metaphorical language using nature imagery. At its root is the notion of *xing* 興 ("metaphoric association"), a suggestive poetic evocation on the basis of a concrete image of nature and, at the same time, one of the basic principles of poetry in the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Songs* (*Shi da xu* 詩大序)[16]. Another important term is *xiang* (image) which we find elaborated upon in the *Book of Changes*. There it says:

> Writing (*wen*) cannot fully convey speech (*yan* 言), and speech cannot fully convey meaning/ideas [...] The sages and worthies used images (*xiang* 象) in order to express their ideas (*yi* 意).[17]

In its emphasis on the image and its potential to convey meaning beyond speech and writing, this passage would have quite an influence on Chinese views on the essence of literature.[18] Taken together, these notions aim at an aesthetically successful fusion of scenic image (*jing* 景) together with idea (*yi*) or feeling (*qing* 情) in a poem (*qing jing rong he* 情景容合). Moreover, according to the just quoted dictum from the *Book of Changes*, the artistic idea created through this fusion should have the effect on the reader as a reverberation of meaning beyond the actual words (*yan wai zhi yi* 言外之意) of the poem. Hence, we find notions such as propounded by Sikong Tu 司空圖（837-908）in the Tang period: "images beyond images" (*xiang wai zhi xiang* 象外之象) or "scenes beyond scenes" (*jing wai zhi jing* 景外之景).[19] After Sikong Tu, they were most succinctly expressed in the Song period by Yan Yu 嚴羽 (1180-1235) in his influential *Canglang's Poetry Talks - Canglang shihua* 滄浪詩話. He used the Chan-Buddhist term *miaowu* 妙悟 ("wonderful enlightenment") as well as other images from this school as a metaphor for the inexplicable essence (meaning beyond words) of poetry.

---

[16] James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975, p. 109f.

[17] *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), *Xicizhuan*, I.12.

[18] It is also being discussed today in the context of the reception of deconstruction, i.e. if there is in China, as Derrida assumed, a preference for writing over speech. See Zhang Longxi, *The Tao and the Logos*, Durham: Duke UP, 1992, pp. 1-34.

[19] For Sikong Tu see Maureen Robertson, "'…To Convey What is Precious': Ssu-k'ung T'u's Poetics and the Erh-shih-ssu Shih-p'in", in: Susan Bush and Christian Murck (eds.), *Theories of the Arts in China*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 3–26. These ideas have been elaborated upon in Liu Xies *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* in his notion of *shensi* 神思(spiritual thought); See Shih, p. 299f.

Another characteristic of Chinese poetics (and art theory) is that it gives weight to two seemingly contradictory notions: to naturalness (*ziran* 自然) and regularity (*fa* 法). When the Chinese literary and art theorists, all through the ages, elaborated on the notion that a work of art both follows nature (*ziran*), and transcends rules (*fa*), they drew their inspiration mostly from Daoist sources. In the Song dynasty, for example, Su Shi (1037-1101), the most influential scholar-literatus for the last 800 years of imperial China in terms of aesthetics, invoked Daoist images of natural creativity when he compared his writing to

> a thousand-gallon spring that issues forth without choosing a site. [...] There is no knowing how it will take shape. But there is one thing I am sure of; it always goes where it should go and stops where it should stop.[20]

Hence, we encounter at this period the idea of "living rules" (*huo fa* 活法), i.e., rules that have to be obeyed and, at the same time, left behind – as opposed to "dead rules" of purely formalistic concern. The stunning aesthetic effect of this unity of opposites can best be observed and studied in the so-called "regular poems" (*lüshi* 律詩), flourishing in the golden age of Chinese poetry, the Tang Dynasty (7^{th}-10^{th} cent.). These poems have to follow a strict set of rules concerning length and number of lines, tone patterns, parallelism and the like. And yet, while reading the works of the greatest poets of that time one has the impression of absolute naturalness and ease in style. Similar characteristics can be observed in Chinese painting which also, traditionally, was defined by certain rules. Yet in the works of great masters, one experiences a sense of freedom from rules and restrictions. Thus, the painter Shitao 石濤 (c. 1641–1717) proclaims: "The highest rule is the rule of no rule (*wu fa zhi fa nai wei zhi fa* 無法之法，乃為至法)."[21] It basically means that all rules have to become so internalized that they turn out to be natural. Regarding the way to achieving this ultimate state of natural creativity, it was clear that diligent practice (*gongfu* 功夫) according to masterful models was the only means. Constant practice and copying in poetry, painting and calligraphy, thus, lead to an "intuitive mastery over the artistic medium"[22] which allowed poets or artists to transcend the rules from which they had originally learnt. This is thus a prime ideal of traditional Chinese aesthetics: achieving a degree of artistic perfection in a work of literature or art which made it seem like a work of nature, and yet conveying a sense of spiritual mastery (*shen* 神). Yan Yu in his *Canglang's Poetry Talks* called this quality in a poem: "entering the realm of the spiritual" (*ru shen* 入神).

2. Chinese Modernity

2.1. Concept of Literature

Has the tradition, sketched out above, been broken off entirely with China entering the modern age? Or can we see some of these pre-modern characteristics still being valid in Chinese modernity – or even postmodernity? Towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the concept of literature changed dramatically in China. Through the efforts of Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929), Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942), and others, European standards were introduced to China with novels and plays: particularly thought of as

---

[20] Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1971, p. 35.

[21] Shitao (Daoji), *Huayulu*, ch. 3, translated in Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art*, New York: Putnam's Sons, 1967, p. 142. Lin Yutang translates *fa* as "method".

[22] Richard John Lynn, "Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: Wang Shih-chen's Theory of Poetry and Its Antecedents", in: William Th. DeBary (ed.): *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1975, pp. 217–269.

having a reformist influence on society, and now featuring as the most prominent forms of literature. One could put it this way: men of letters who were steeped in poetic sensibility and considered the aesthetics of poetry as the quintessence of refined (*ya* 雅) literary expression, were, within a decade, thrown into a context in which novels in the colloquial language, previously considered a vulgar (*su* 俗) form of literature, came to rule as the prime literary medium. Not only this, the venerated classical language (*wenyan* 文言) was attacked as elitist and bookish and was soon abolished in favor of the colloquial language (*baihua* 白話). Thus the traditional standards of refinement and vulgarity, of poetry and narrative literature, were turned topsy-turvy. Needless to say, complementary notions such as diligent practice after models in order to gain "intuitive control over the artistic medium" (*gongfu* 功夫) vanished. This, however, was not only true for China; it is a shift that occurred in Europe a mere hundred years earlier. For example, in his Aesthetics (*Critique of Judgment*), Immanuel Kant stressed the adherence to rules and "scholarly" aspects (*Schulgerechtes*), in other words, art and literature had to be "mastered" through constant practice. Only in the Romantic period (19th cent.) was the notion given up in favor of the ideal of genius (which Kant also first propounded).

Be that as it may, the new generation of modernist Chinese writers established itself by attacking the morally didactic Confucian tradition of literature, and yet, as it very soon became clear, the new literature turned very narrowly didactic in a new ideological sense, that is, it was supposed to "carry" only another "Way" (*zai dao* 載道), one now imported from Europe. After only two decades, literature was now to conform to Marxist and Soviet ideals like "revolutionary Romanticism". In short, as Mao wanted it to be, and as Lenin once declared, literature should assume the role of "cog and screw in the revolutionary machinery".

2.2. Criticism

Contrary to Western trends beginning in the 1920, i.e. with the emergence of "New Criticism" and its focus on "close reading", attention to texts and disinterest in the "author's intention", character criticism stayed alive in early Chinese modernity, particularly in the mud-slinging among literary circles during and after the May Fourth movement. Hence, this tendency seems historically consistent. This also applies to the different evaluation of ancients and contemporaries. Yet, due to the extensive reception of Western literary standards in China at the beginning of the 20th century, we notice different accents. The veneration of the ancients ceased to play a dominant role, not implying, however, that contemporaries were now respected instead. Quite the contrary: the veneration of the far and distant took its place, that is to say, the more Western, the better. Foreign criteria became the standard of something new, as yet undefined, but which was expected to lead China out of backwardness and into the modern period. This included not only literature and arts but also ideology. The claim of absolute validity of a new and foreign orthodoxy replaced that which was traditionally Chinese – only to mention the shift from Confucianism to Marxism. Hence the criticism by Wang Chong, Cao Pi, and Liu Xie against these tendencies still applies. As Cao Pi put it 1800 years ago: "Men of average intelligence are given to treasuring what comes from afar and regarding what comes from nearby with contempt."[23]

This, at least in part, explains the polemical excesses of this period in which also an extraordinary figure such as Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936) indulged. Instigated by an article of

[23] Cf. footnote 7 above.

his colleague Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895-1976), published in 1934, with the title *Zuo wen yu zuo ren* 作文與作人 (To write literature and to behave properly), Lu Xun (in 1935, one year before his death) wrote seven articles under the title *Wenren xiang qing* 文人相輕 (Scholars scorn each other).[24] The topic, taken from Cao Pi's quoted text above, obviously must have hit a nerve with him. Lin Yutang mocks the quarrels among men of letters, as in the following passage, which he opens with the citation from Cao Pi:

> "The scholars like to scorn each other". Like women they criticize the looks of face and feet. [...] That's why the different literary cliques insult each other, such as colloquialists against the classicists, classicists against colloquialists, folk-literature against Bolshevik literature, Bolsheviks against proponents of a "third category". All are fighting against each other like setting out from different enemy camps, they are forming groups and fractions, are throwing spears against lances. In streets and alleys as well as in newspaper jottings they abuse each other.[25]

The tendency to identify works with the character of the writer has been kept alive until the latest periods in Chinese literature. In the Mao era, and even thereafter, works of writers were criticized with explicit critiques of their bourgeois character; writers of the other camp were praised because of the revolutionary or patriotic spirit of their writings. In today's pluralizing China, however, Western preferences of distinguishing between work and character of the author are apparently becoming more and more prevalent. And yet, the situation seems somewhat ambivalent; for now, on the one hand, it is possible to criticize, as has been done, the work of, say, Wei Hui 衛慧, Mian Mian 棉棉, or Hong Ying 虹影 as trash[26] without referring to a possibly debased character of these bestselling female authors. On the other hand, some authors appear trying to live up to the (not only Western) expectations of the freewheeling, rebellious writer, unbound by social conventions, as the West has come to accept from the writers of the Romantic period to those of the Beat Generation. Thus – willing or non-willing – the age-old link between work and author appears to be re-established. Be that as it may, the hermeneutical debate as to the object of understanding in the process of criticism – the original intention of the author or one's subjective interpretation – is still going on; and the question of whether the focus on the author's "intention" is a "fallacy" or not, as Wimsatt and Beardsley argued in 1954 in their famous essay, is still open.

2.3. "Theoretical" Concepts

In early Chinese modernity, some essayists of the May Fourth period, such as the already mentioned Lin Yutang and Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885- 1967; the brother of Lu Xun), explored other realms of the Chinese classical tradition and found much that they could use for their modern discussion of literature. This is remarkable, as the main-stream of Chinese modernity of this period held a radically anti-traditionalistic attitude. Zhou Zuoren, for example, classified the entire pre-modern tradition into two categories: authors in the didactic fashion (*zaidaopai* 載道派) and literati who favoured individual expression (*yanzhipai* 言志派). Both terms are classical coinages: as was mentioned, *zai dao* refers to the dictum of the Neo-Confucian thinker Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-1073) in the Song period, who maintained

---

[24] They are all included in his collection *Qiejieting zawen*, II, *Lu Xun quan ji*, VI, pp. 298, 335, 373, 377, 381, 399, 403.

[25] Lin Yutang, "Zuo wen yu zuo ren" in *Wode hua* (我的话), Shanghai 1934, p. 442-443.

[26] Outside of China, this criticism was levelled by Wolfgang Kubin, causing a great controversy within China; see Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "Ties That Blind". In: *South China Morning Post*, January 21, 2007, p. 5.

that literature was supposed to "carry the [Confucian] 'Way' (*dao* 道)". *Yan zhi*, on the other hand, refers to the quoted saying from the Great Preface to the *Book of Songs* that "poetry expresses intent [of the person/author]" (*shi yan zhi* 詩言志). Needless to say, it was the *yanzhipai* – now considered the Chinese equivalent to Western expressionism and romanticism – which Zhou Zuoren regarded as the most valid tradition of Chinese literature. Hence, as Marston Anderson pointed out, the classical phrase *yanzhi* became one of the most popular terms among critics of the May Fourth period.[27]

Zhou Zuoren as well as Lin Yutang drew their inspiration mainly from certain Chinese literati of the late Ming Dynasty: Yuang Hongdao and his two brothers from the Gongan-School, who gained fame, just like their mentor Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602), for being unconventional thinkers and critics of Confucian orthodoxy. As mentioned above, Yuan Hongdao provided a critical term that Zhou Zuoren and Lin Yutang were very much intrigued with: *xingling* ("individual sensibility"). This term, connoting individuality beyond the narrow confines of Confucian morality, became established – at least for a while – as standard in modern Chinese literary discourse. Lin Yutang's and Zhuo Zuoren's predilection can, on the one hand, be explained by the fact that the literati of the Gongan-school belonged to the heterodox field of Chinese thinkers, and thus could not be associated with the Confucian mainstream, so much criticized in this period. On the other hand, their preference is also in line with the early modern Chinese reception of Western romanticism and expressionism, which favours individual expression in contrast to pragmatic or didactic literature. Irony of history, as mentioned earlier, the course that modern Chinese literature was going to take in the long run was even more didactic than before, now only under Marxist premises.

In the last years of the Qing Dynasty, and thus before the beginning of radical Chinese modernity in the May Fourth Movement, Wang Guowei 王國维 (1877-1927) published his famous *ci*-poetry talks *Renjian cihua* 人間詞語 ("Poetry Talks in the Human World"). In this work he coined a terminology – *jìngjie* 境界 ("conceptional world", "poetic state") and *yijìng* 意境 ("artistic conception") – that had a decisive impact on modern Chinese aesthetics and criticism. Wang Guowei was concerned with the idea of artistic unity in a poem (particularly, but not only, in *ci*-poetry). This sense of poetic unity, or aesthetic completeness, is connected with ideas that reach back to the earliest Chinese notions on the essence of poetry, such as *xiang* (image) and *xing* ("metaphoric evocation", "allegory" etc.), the first from the *Book of Changes*, the later from the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Songs*. Both terms served, as already mentioned, as key notions for the mode of poetic expression. *Xing*, in particular, came to be used as the quintessence of metaphoric poetic diction from antiquity until modern times, with Mao Zedong, as a writer of classical style poems, still discussing matters of poetry with this term.

As it happened, in the Tang Dynasty, when Buddhism became *en vogue* among the Chinese literati, Buddhist concepts entered the discussion on poetry and aesthetics. Thus a term emerged which in Sanskrit is called *vishaya* and which in the "Conscious-Only-School" (*Weishi zong* 唯識宗) refers to an "objective mental projection regarded as reality."[28] The Chinese translation for *vishaya* is *jìng* (境), and this character now became popular in poetic discussion as a term connoting not only the perception of scenic images but also the

[27] Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism. Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990.

[28] Or "sphere or realm in which the mind gropes for an object which is its own imagination." Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton UP 1963, p. 372.

conception of a successful artistic idea in a poem.[29] With his notion of *jìngjie* (or *yijìng*), Wang Guowei, on the one hand, picked up a thread that is genuinely Chinese (partly Buddhist), on the other, he drew inspiration from his knowledge of German Idealism, particularly Kant, Schiller and Schopenhauer, for he was one of the earliest Chinese thinkers engaged in the reception of Western philosophy. It is still an object of debate, though, who of these three philosophers exerted the greatest influence on Wang, or, as one should put it, who exerted influence at which period in Wang Guowei's life.[30] Be that as it may, Wang amalgamated an important traditional Chinese concept with ideas newly found in Western aesthetics.

With Wang Guowei's term *jìngjie* (or *yijìng*), we have one of the most important notions of Chinese literary theory, beginning with the Great Preface of the *Book of Songs* and ending – over the great literati of the Tang and Song, particularly Sikong Tu and Yan Yu – in the Qing period with Wang Fuzhi's idea of merging feeling (*qing*) and scene (*jing*) and with Wang Shizhen's 王士禎(1634-1711) concept of "spiritual resonance" (*shenyun* 神韻) as the quintessence of poetry. For this reason, one might agree with Craig Fisk who calls Wang Guowei's notion a "performance of an earlier idea"[31] – a performance, though, that had a decisive influence on modern Chinese thought. In addition, other than most critical terms that were imported from the West since the May Fourth period, we here have, as it were, a double-term that is not only genuinely Chinese, it also expresses a Chinese sensitivity towards literary quality that has not lost its aesthetic value in Western-shaped modernity. And yet, at the same time, it bears the imprint of early Chinese engagement with Western philosophy. For this reason, it played a great role in the aesthetic discussions of the middle of the 20th century, such as in the works of Zong Baihua 宗白華 (1897–1986) and Li Zehou 李澤厚, two of the most influential aestheticians in the modern period.

2.4. Chinese Postmodernism and its Classical Prefigurations

With postmodernism entering China – a multi-facetted cluster of ideas, one of which is the notion of eclecticism ("anything goes") – we find not only borrowings from the rich Chinese literary and aesthetic heritage but also attempts to show parallels between some postmodern (in fact poststructuralist) to pre-modern Chinese thought. One of the leading theorists in poststructuralism is Derrida, with his notion of deconstruction, which first of all calls into question the tradition of Western metaphysics. But Derrida's thought also had a tremendous impact on literary studies, leading to a plethora of epigones practicing deconstructive readings of texts. As to Chinese Daoist thought, there are remarkable similarities in Derrida's strategy of deconstructing the meaning of texts to those found in the texts of Laozi 老子, (*Daodejing* 道德經), or Zhuangzi 莊子 (particularly in the latter's important second chapter "Qiwulun 齊物論"). Also, both seem to be aligned in their anti-traditionalist and anti-conventionalist thrust as well as in their position of radical relativism. And yet, as A.C. Graham already

[29] *Jingjie* was already in usage. Wang used this character and fused it with *yi*, sometimes he only used *jìng*.

[30] Wang Keping sees Schopenhauer's influence in Wang's early phase, Kant as influential for his *Renjian cihua*, and Schiller's letters on aesthetic education as most influential in Wang's ideas on aesthetic education. See Wang Keping, "Wang Guowei: Philosophy of Aesthetic Criticism", in Chung-ying Cheng (ed.), *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, Malden: Blackwell, 2002. See also: Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China. Von der Tradition bis zur Moderne*, München: Saur, 2006, p. 414ff.

[31] Craig Fisk, "The Alterity of Chinese Literature in Its Critical Contexts", Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews, 2 (1980), S. 94f.

warned, "the parallel is indeed so striking that there is danger of missing the difference."[32] While Derrida tries, for example, to deconstruct traditional hierarchical structures of binary opposites by reversing them (speech *vs*. writing, reality *vs*. appearance, nature *vs*. culture, etc.), in the Daoist tradition, binary opposites are conceived as complementary (as *Yin* 陰 and *Yang* 陽), and the meaning of reversing (*fan* 反), as a key concept of Daoism, is ultimately to transcend the basic relativity of existence.

Cai Zong-qi, to give another example, pointed out the similarity of poststructuralism (deconstruction) to another important pre-modern tradition of thought, one not exactly Chinese by origin, but Indian, and yet one that became most influential for Chinese Buddhism: Nagarjuna's school of the "Middle Way" (*Madhyamika*) and its Chinese followers, such as Sengzhao 僧肇 (374–414) and Jizang 吉蔵 (549–623). Similarly to Derrida, Madhyamika pursues a strategy of negating meaning until, in the end, a state is reached at which meaning (or being) can neither be affirmed nor negated. As Chinese Buddhism did have a decisive influence on literature, these similarities seem to allow for a free flow of thought between Western modernity and Chinese tradition which – in its eclectic way – is very much part of the postmodern message. But here again, as before, it is dangerous to miss the differences while dwelling on the similarities. Madhyamika Buddhism aims – through the sketched means – at the liberation of man from all conceptual attachments. Deconstruction is, in comparison, as M.H. Abrahms once put it, more a guide to "do things with words".

Finally, in the postmodern period, a trait of literature came into view which is as old as literature itself, i.e., books speak about other books, and poems refer to other poems. Forty years ago, Julia Kristeva, one of the earliest poststructuralist critics, termed this relationship of texts to other texts "intertextuality". By now, this notion has departed from the somewhat narrow way the term was originally applied in Kristeva's work from 1967[33]; instead it has come to embrace well-known features of literary style such as influence and allusion. Particularly the latter, allusion, seems to be a facet of intertextuality that is most visible (or invisible, that is, visible only to the learned reader) in Chinese poetry. In some instances, particularly in the Song period with Huang Tingjian 黄庭堅 (1045—1105), the usage of allusion in a poem even came to be an art in itself. The basis of using allusion to such an extent was, first of all, a tremendous erudition, second, an ability to alienate the quotes from their original appearance, and third, the aesthetic enjoyment – in the learned reader – of recognizing the original bits and pieces in a new context.

As to Kristeva, she wanted intertextuality to replace intersubjectivity. For her, meaning was not supposed to be transferred directly from writer to reader but, instead, mediated through, or filtered by, "codes" imparted to the writer and reader by other texts. Yet in the Chinese context of traditional literature, particularly in poetry, it is not only allusion that is a prevalent characteristic. One could also say, as already mentioned, in the way that poetry was regarded as the reflection of the person (*shi ru qi ren* 詩如其人), texts were read as *intersubjective* encounters with authors, and *intertextual* allusion, thus, was also a form of *intersubjectivity*: a meeting or conversation of author with author, as was pointed out at the beginning with quotations by Mencius, Wang Chong, Liu Xie and Ye Xie. The Chinese even had a special way – or genre – reserved for such conversations: so-called "harmonizing (or answering) poems" (*he shi* 和詩): a poet answered to a poem of a friend by using the same structure and rhyme words as in his friend's poem. Such poetic conversations, however, not only took place

[32] Agnus Graham, *Disputers of the Tao– Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, La Salle: Open Court 1989, p. 227.
[33] Julia Kristeva, "Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman". In : *Critique* (1967) No. 239, p. 438-465.

with living poets as friends (Bai Juyi 白居易 772-846 and his friend Yuan Zhen 元稹 779-831 are known for this exchange), but with friends over centuries. For example, the Song Dynasty poet Su Shi 蘇軾 (Su Dongpo 蘇東坡), one of the most famous Chinese writers of all ages, admired the poetry of the hermit poet Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (who lived roughly 800 years before) to such an extent, that he wrote "harmonizing poems" to almost each of the existing poems of Tao Yuanming, thus expressing his identification with the man, his character and his writing.

As intersubjectivity emphasizes the sharing of views and consensus, seeing this as essential in the shaping of our ideas and relations, it appears to be one of these arbitrary postmodern theoretical constructions – or unjustified generalizations – to simply replace intersubjectivity with intertextuality. For the Chinese writers of old, although they did not have the modern theoretical jargon and buzzwords at their disposal, both aspects – text *and* author – certainly intertwined with each other, and one could not be given up at the cost of the other. Zhang Longxi made the difference quite clear when he pointed out: "While a deconstructive *intertexte* is a trace without origin, a Chinese intertext is always a trace leading back to the origin, to the fountainhead of tradition, the great thinkers of Taoism and Confucianism."[34]

3. Conclusion

All over the world we now have Western priorities, also in literature, art and aesthetics. According to these standards, a work of art has to be conceptually innovative, it has to serve a liberating function or should, at least, be politically critical – not to mention the "achievements" brought about by Dadaism, deconstruction and such. In contrast to these tendencies we have a – largely broken off – Chinese tradition with different priorities. There, a work of literature or art, first of all, should possess suggestive poetic qualities – an enriching capacity beyond the actual work (poetry or painting). Also, a writer or artist ought to have "perfect intuitive control of the artistic medium" through long and arduous practice (*gongfu*), as only then will he be able to create great works of literature and art with a "spiritual" impact. Last but not least, the work is considered to be a reflection of the author.

The majority of Chinese writers and artists – in and out of China – follow the Western trend, consciously or unconsciously. The notion of effort – *gongfu* – certainly has evaporated, having been replaced by originality – in imitation of the Western Romantic cult of the genius. We now find numerous writers, novelists most of all, who would like to publish something "original"; if that doesn't work, one tries to cash in on the latest Western trends or just simply writes about fashionable (often trivial) topics – literature has to sell, after all. But just as Western modernity is unthinkable without a constant re-engagement with its own long history and tradition so, too, is there a possibility that China, on her way into global modernity, might also become more aware of her own rich cultural tradition as an object of active engagement. Because of the increasing Western interest, the rediscovery of her tradition might even serve as a means for further cultural and artistic exchange. The encounter of cultures didn't begin in the last decade, but it has gained a new dimension in the age of globalization. It has to be seen how writers and artists will arrange themselves in their moves between different cultures and traditions. And thus only time will tell to which hybrid forms of literature and art this will lead to: if there will be great works resulting from this fusion, and whether or not the rich Chinese literary and artistic tradition will still play a significant part in this encounter.

[34] Zhang Longxi, *The Tao and the Logos*, p. 33.

Books cited:

Anderson, Marston: *The Limits of Realism. Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990

Bush, Susan: *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1971

Chan, Wing-tsit: *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton UP 1963

Fisk, Craig: "The Alterity of Chinese Literature in Its Critical Contexts", Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews, 2 (1980)

Forke, Alfred (trans.): *Lun Heng*, London 1907 – 1911

Graham, Agnus: *Disputers of the Tao– Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, La Salle: Open Court 1989

Guo, Shaoyu 郭紹虞: *Zhongguo lidai wenlun xuan* 中國歷代文論選, Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1979

Kristeva, Julia : "Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman". In : *Critique* (1967) No. 239, p. 438-465

Legge, James (trans.): *The Chinese Classics*, II: *The Works of Mencius*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895

Legge, James (trans.): The Sacred Books of China, II: *The Yi King or Book of Changes*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1882

Lin, Yutang: "Zuo wen yu zuo ren" in *Wode hua* (我的话), Shanghai 1934, p. 442-443

Liu, James J. Y.: *Chinese Theories of Literature*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975

Liu, Xizai 劉熙載, *Yigai* 藝概, Shanghai 1978

Lu, Xun: *Qiejieting zawen*, II, *Lu Xun quan ji*, VI

Lynn, Richard John: "Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: Wang Shih-chen's Theory of Poetry and Its Antecedents", in: William Th. DeBary (ed.): *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1975, pp. 217–269

Owen, Stephen: *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1992

Pohl, Karl-Heinz: *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China. Von der Tradition bis zur Moderne*, München: Saur, 2006

Robertson, Maureen: "'…To Convey What is Precious': Ssu-k'ung T'u's Poetics and the Erh-shih-ssu Shih-p'in", in: Susan Bush and Christian Murck (eds.), *Theories of the Arts in China*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 3–26

Shih, Vincent Yu-chung (trans.): *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, Hong Kong 1983

Shitao (Daoji): *Huayulu*, translated in Lin Yutang, *The Chinese Theory of Art*, New York: Putnam's Sons, 1967

Tatlow, Didi Kirsten: "Ties That Blind". In: *South China Morning Post*, January 21, 2007, p. 5

Wang, Keping: "Wang Guowei: Philosophy of Aesthetic Criticism", in Chung-ying Cheng (ed.), *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, Malden: Blackwell, 2002

Wong, Siu-kit: *Early Chinese Literary Criticism*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1983

Zhang, Longxi: *The Tao and the Logos*, Durham: Duke UP, 1992