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Wai-leung Wong
Chinese University of Hong Kong

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CHINESE LITERATURE, THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION, AND GLOBALIZATION

Wai-leung Wong

I. Preliminaries

A. A Brief Introduction to Chinese Literature

Chinese literature began more than two thousand years ago, with *The Book of Poetry* (*Shijing*) as its first anthology. This book, compiled sometime after 600 B.C. by Confucius (551–479 B.C.), is a collection of 305 poems that date back to a period between approximately 800 and 600 B.C. The first stanza of the beginning poem of the book reads as follows:

“Fair, fair” cry the ospreys
On the island in the river.
Lovely is this noble lady,
Fit bride for our lord.¹

This poem, with a total of four stanzas, is about courtship and marriage. Other subjects such as friendship, hunting, agriculture, war, political protest, and dynasties are found in the anthology, the content of which is diversified and presented with artistic skills that influenced the literary works of later generations. Among the rhetorical devices employed in this first poem of *The Book of Poetry* is the use of metaphor — crying ospreys compared to the lord and lady, for instance. The poet, an anonymous one, is imaginative in the way he blends together two images that at first seem unrelated, but are certainly relevant if we interpret the crying of ospreys as an act of courtship.

Following *The Book of Poetry*, highlights of traditional Chinese literature include *The Songs of the South (Chuci)*; the prose writings in history and philosophy of the Qin and Han dynasties; Tang poetry; the Song lyric; the prose of the Tang and Song dynasties; and the short stories, novels, and dramas from the Tang to the Qing dynasties. Such writers as Qu Yuan (343?–278 B.C.), Tao Qian (365–427), Li Bai (701–762), Du Fu (712–770), Han Yu (768–824), Su Shi (1037–1101), and Cao Xueqin (1724?–1764) are among the greatest names of the classical period, and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo yanyi)*, *The Water Margins (Shuihu zhuan)*, *The Journey to the West (Xiyou ji)*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou meng)* are the best-known novels of traditional China. Talking about pre-twentieth-century Chinese literature, we would certainly cite the above names and titles, although we are reminded that Chinese literature is much richer, more diversified, and more complex than this list suggests. The achievements of classical Chinese literature as manifested in its various genres, styles, themes, and subject matter cannot be adequately stated in any brief introduction. *The Complete Tang Poems (Quan Tang shi)*, compiled in the Qing dynasty, the two dynasties—Tang and Qing—being a millennium apart), which is, in fact, not complete at all, consists of more than 48,000 poems by some 2,200 authors. This work alone attests to the tremendous quantity of Chinese literature. The modern period of Chinese literature, which began in the 1910s, is even more multifarious and voluminous. Running the risk of abstraction and oversimplification, I characterize Chinese literature as the expression of both the heart and the mind, as concerning the individual and society, as variously sublime and graceful, and as blending reality and the imagination.

B. The Creative Imagination

Imagination is the action or power of forming mental images or ideas of what is not actually present. In psychological terms, the power of reproducing images stored in the memory under the suggestions of associated images is reproductive imagination, while the power of recombining former experiences in the creation of new images, which is directed at a specific goal or aiding in the solution of problems, is creative imagination. In the

realm of literary and art criticism, imagination is a power capable of blending various images and experiences to produce something that has never existed before, a hitherto unperceived vision of reality. The English poet-critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his famous discourse on imagination, stresses the creative power of imagination, a synthetic ability that “reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities; of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image;” imagination “forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole.”²

In Chinese literary criticism, discussions on the creative imagination date back to the third century. Lu Ji (261 – 303) thus describes the mental state of a writer engaged in creative writing: “The spirit at full gallop reaches the eight limits of the cosmos, and the mind, self-buoyant, will ever soar to new insurmountable heights;” with this powerful spirit, “eternity he sees in a twinkling, and the whole world he views in one glance.”³ Two hundred years later, the great critic Liu Xie (c. 465–522) coined the term *shensi* to denote this mental process of creativity. *Shensi* has been generally regarded by modern scholars in comparative literature as the equivalent of the Western concept of imagination. The chapter on *shensi* in Liu Xie’s *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong*) thus begins: “An ancient said, ‘One may be on the rivers and sea in body, but his mind remains at the palace gate.’”⁴

This is what I mean by *shensi*, or spiritual thought or imagination. One who is engaged in literary thought travels far in spirit. Quietly absorbed in contemplation, his thinking reaches back one thousand years, and with only the slightest movement of his countenance, his vision penetrates ten thousand *li*; he creates the music of pearls and jade between his poetic lines, and he witnesses the rolling of wind and clouds right before his brows and lashes. These things are possible because of the imagination.⁵

Liu Xie further notes that when the power of imagination is in operation, “all possible vistas are open before the writer,” and the writer has to organize what he perceives into something “coherent and unified.”⁶

Creative imagination—or, simply, imagination—is thus the faculty of association and assimilation, a necessary power in artistic creation. This power enables the artist to produce by

association other images and ideas in addition to what is readily available to him; it also enables him to organize by *assimilation*, as well as selection, the various images and ideas into a coherent and unified expression.

C. Chinese Literature and the Creative Imagination

Qu Yuan, the ancient patriotic Chinese poet, exemplifies the power of imagination in a grand style. Descended from a noble family, he was a statesman who rose and fell in the royal court. Deeply frustrated and profoundly sad, he wrote *Encountering Sorrow (Lisao)* in exile to give vent to his tragic sentiments. In it, he recounts his ancestry and character, his political endeavors and defeat, his concern for the people and his loyalty to the king. Repeatedly searching for advice from the wise and for an ideal environment, he sets out on an imaginary journey to Heaven:

I watered my horses at the sun's bathing pool;
I fastened my reins on a sacred mulberry tree.
Plucking a golden bough to brush the sun,
I roamed around, leisurely and carefree.

I ordered the Moon-charioteer to lead the way,
The Wind-God to rush along and follow behind.
The King-phoenix acted as my herald,
But Master Thunder told me that he was not ready.

I bade the phoenix to soar aloft,
To press on by day and by night.
The whirlwinds gathered and then scattered,
Marshalling the clouds and rainbows to greet me.⁷

Qu Yuan was exceptionally gifted with imagination, as were later poets such as Li Bai, Du Fu, and Su Shi, to name but a very few. Shakespeare's observation that the poet is "of imagination all compact" serves aptly as an epithet of both the Elizabethan bard and the Chinese poets just mentioned. Perhaps one may make a casual comparison in passing: while Shakespeare is known for his imaginative connection with the rose, the Tang poet Li Bai is known for his association with the moon. Once, Li Bai encountered sorrow as Qu Yuan did—but on a smaller scale—and found himself drinking alone under the moon. Both the

poet and the moon, in the poet's imagination, are lonely. He invites the moon to be his friend and befriends another, that is, the poet's own shadow, making a party of three. The poet drinks and sings and dances with his shadow. Toasting the moon, the poet says, "Let us pledge a friendship without human ties, / And meet again at the far end of the Milky Way."⁸ This scene represents one of the many imaginative associations between the poet and the moon, a recurring image and a central symbol in Li Bai's poetry.

I have cited here only a couple of poems to illustrate imagination in Chinese literature. In the other genres, be it prose or fiction, this artistic faculty is equally fundamental. The novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, for instance, is noted for its imaginative prelude about the mythic story of the stone (in fact, the novel has another title, *Story of the Stone*), while *The Journey to the West* is a tale about characters and episodes belonging to surrealism and supernaturalism — in short, it is a work of sustained imagination and fancy.

Literary works are products of many ingredients, including feeling, thought, knowledge, form, and the use of language; imagination, being but one of the many ingredients, is, however, a very important one because it alone can unify most of the other ingredients. In this regard, Chinese literature is no different from other literatures of the world.

II. Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and the West

A. From Tradition to Modernity

Traditional Chinese literature developed under the intellectual influences of Confucianism, Daoism (Taoism), and Buddhism. Confucianism preaches benevolence, righteousness, individual effort, commitment to society, and harmony among people. Daoism maintains a different view by suggesting that man should disengage himself from worldly affairs and be in harmony with nature. Both Confucianism and Daoism are indigenous schools of thought. Buddhism came to China from India two thousand years ago and gradually became an inseparable part of Chinese thinking, one that urges people to deemphasize their mortal selves and gains in the transient world; it contends

that the highest achievement for human beings is the attainment of nirvana, a state of peace and inactiveness. Traditional Chinese literature embodies all three; stress on individual schools varies with the time and the writers. A single writer such as Su Shi might embrace all three schools in the different stages of his life. Traditional Chinese literature came under the influence of Christianity in the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644), when Western missionaries made their way to China. As music is related to poetry, traditional Chinese poetry was inevitably influenced by the music of the non-Chinese ethnic groups who resided mostly on the Chinese borders. In general, traditional Chinese literature, though mainly a product of Chinese civilization, has absorbed, in its course of development, certain elements from cultures other than the Chinese. Besides Buddhism, external influences on traditional Chinese literature were not obvious and significant because China, until the middle of the nineteenth century, was largely a self-sufficient kingdom having minimal communication with the West. However, within traditional Chinese literature itself, writers knew well the importance of learning from others. Du Fu is one of the prime examples in that he borrows handsomely from his predecessors yet creates something uniquely his own.

Chinese literature in the twentieth century made a dramatic turn to the West. This change affected not just literature but virtually all aspects of Chinese culture. Plagued by corruption, political upheavals, wars, and poverty, China as a nation and a civilization was considered feudalistic, backward, and inferior to others. Deep changes became necessary. The May Fourth Movement early in this century meant the opening of an old and closed civilization to Western ideas and material progress. Science and Democracy were the battle cries of the time. Champions for the new vernacular literature, such as Hu Shih (1891 – 1962) and Lu Xun (1881 – 1936), denounced the old tradition and wrote in the styles and techniques they had acquired from the West. Although there were educated people who resisted Westernization in literature and other intellectual endeavors, the overall cultural environment was clearly for it. The “progressive” intellectuals made “journeys to the West” (not to be confused with the title of the classical novel previously mentioned), spiritually as well as physically. In Ithaca, New York, Hu Shih

wrote his poems in the form of the sonnet and in English; in England, Xu Zhimo (1897–1931) called on Thomas Hardy, who, in addition to Bertrand Russell, was his mentor. Back in China after studying in Colorado Springs and Chicago, Wen Yiduo (1899–1946) on one pensive occasion recited lines from Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," where the "moon lies fair," instead of remembering poems by Li Bai and Du Fu in which the moon is also fair.⁹

B. The Three Great Waves

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, the intellectual warehouses at the Chinese seaports were filled with fervently sought-after goods imported from the coasts of the Atlantic Ocean. Darwinism, romanticism, pragmatism, Ibsenism, Marxism, Freudianism, concepts of science and democracy, and so on came to the Middle Kingdom, often in a wholesale manner. In the sphere of literature, Western genres and techniques introduced to China include the free verse, the sonnet, the dramatic monologue, and the epic in poetry; new modes of narration in fiction; and tragedy in drama. The first twenty-five years of this century witnessed an all-out movement toward Westernization, and the flow of Western literary trends and "isms" into China has never stopped. In the 1950s and 1960s, another gigantic wave of Westernization, or modernization, reached Taiwan, where Chinese writers welcomed the fashionable modernism—including symbolism, surrealism, stream-of-consciousness, and existentialism—and were subsequently influenced by it. The third great wave came at the end of the 1970s. After the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), intellectuals in Mainland China once again blamed the sociopolitical chaos and failures of the past on traditional culture, and they turned to the West. The three waves from the West have brought to the East myriad trends and ideologies in literature and its related disciplines. The list of Western authors who have cast their spell on China, either lastingly or temporarily, in one way or another, includes Matthew Arnold, M. H. Abrams, George Byron, Roland Barthes, Albert Camus, Jonathan Culler, Dante Alighieri, Jacques Derrida, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, Robert Frost, Sigmund Freud, Northrop Frye, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Nadine Gordimer, Ger-

maine Greer, William Shakespeare, Jean Paul Sartre, Edward Said, William B. Yeats, Émile Zola, and is inexhaustible.

To be sure, twentieth-century Chinese literature has been receptive to the literary works of such Eastern countries as India and Japan, but the presence of the West is quite overwhelming. The West wind blows strong and is at times destructive (which is not unlike the West wind in Percy Shelley's poem); at the least, it has aroused controversies. In China, there have been debates on many issues concerning the vices and virtues of Western literature. Marxist ideology, Freudian pansexism, and nihilistic existentialism, for example, have all been heatedly discussed. The advisability of relying heavily on imported free verse has been more than once questioned since it "deconstructed" the tradition-honored versification that followed rigorous prosodic rules. The value of the sundry theories of contemporary criticism is seriously doubted by some "conservative" Chinese critics because, to quote a remark, "technical terms are pushed to and fro, but the investigation stands still"¹⁰ when these theories are applied to literary works.

However, the influence of the West on twentieth-century Chinese literature is an undeniable fact, and Western literature and critical theories have become an important part of modern Chinese literature. No Chinese intellectual nowadays is bold or stupid enough to reject all the Western influences. The East has met the West, and they now coexist and are even integrated. The truly learned and open-minded scholars of literature in China have adopted a comparative perspective in their discourses on literature, whether Chinese or non-Chinese. The concept of world literature (*Weltliteratur*)—"National literature is without much meaning; now it is the era of world literature"—as advocated by Goethe one and a half centuries ago has been accepted in principle by these Chinese scholars. At this juncture, I would like to cite three scholar-writers in order to illustrate this broad vision in dealing with literature. They are Qian Zhongshu (1910–), Yu Guangzhong (1928–), and Huang Guobin (1946–), who now reside in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, respectively.

C. Qian Zhongshu, Yu Guangzhong, and Huang Guobin

In addition to Chinese and English, Qian Zhongshu reads another five languages and is renowned for his photographic memory and encyclopedic learning. His criticism *On the Art of Poetry* (*Tanyi lu*), the four-volume *Guanzhui bian*,¹¹ and other articles published from the 1940s to 1980s established him as the paragon for scholars and comparatists in China; his short stories and his novel *Fortress Besieged* (*Weicheng*), published in the forties, are hailed as modern classics. Multilingual since his youth, Qian always thinks multiculturally and does comparisons likewise. In his article “Poetry as a Vehicle of Grief” (*Shi keyi yuan*),¹² Qian dwells on the idea of “a sick oyster becoming a pearl” in literary creation by quoting — or, to be more accurate, remembering — sources in Chinese and then moving on without any apparent effort to sayings by Franz Grillparzer, Flaubert, Heine, and A. E. Housman, the last of whom claims that poetry is a secretion, natural or morbid, “like the pearl in the oyster.” In the same manner, Qian expounds on the notion of grief in literature by summoning the words of a host of Eastern and Western literary figures (“Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts” and so on) to support his argument. He does not merely quote or remember; he makes analyses and comparisons. His ultimate goal is to demonstrate that there are common views and understandings among different cultures. In his novel *Fortress Besieged*, the characters chat freely during a dinner party about Plato, Bergson, and Russell, in addition to Chinese poetry and painting, and then the topic changes to life and marriage. One character, Shen-ming, says,

As for Bertie’s marriages and divorces, I have talked with him about them. He quoted an old English saying that marriage is like a gilded bird cage. The birds outside want to get in, and the birds inside want to fly out. So you have marriage and divorce, divorce and marriage in endless succession.

Miss Su replies,

There’s a French saying similar to that. Instead of a bird cage, it’s a fortress under siege (*forteresse assiégée*). The people outside the

city want to break in and the people inside the city want to escape....¹³

Such transcultural discourses abound in the novel. Often the omniscient narrator, acting as commentator, exposes the vices and weaknesses of humankind by ridiculing people of different nationalities, with the Irish, the French, the German, etc., all serving as his targets.

With an excellent command of both Chinese and English as well as knowledge of a few other languages, Yu Guangzhong is a prolific writer with a broad cultural vision and wide-ranging imagination. A superb craftsman and stylist, Yu is considered by many to be the finest contemporary poet and essayist writing in Chinese. A professor of English literature and Chinese literature in various periods of his teaching career, Yu writes his scholarly papers and criticism as an expert in comparative literature does. Among his most notable articles are "A Comparison of Chinese and Western Literatures" (*Zhongxi wenxue de bijiao*, written in 1967) and "Gong Zizhen and Shelley" (1984).¹⁴ A macroscopic study, the former discusses aspects of myth, religion, the man-nature relationship, love, and language in the two literary traditions, with an emphasis on their differences. The latter explores the life and work of two nineteenth-century poets, one Chinese and one English, in juxtaposition. Yu has made a number of interesting observations about love, family, patriotism, and poetic style. These observations are of secondary importance in the context of our discussion here. What should strike us is Yu's way of transcultural thinking, and his ease in penetrating the life of Shelley and the English literary tradition that belongs to a culture other than his own. The two poets and their two cultures are treated on an equal footing and they seem to have engaged in a dialogue using a common language.

In creative writings, Yu's imagination roams over the ancient and the modern, as well as between the East and the West. Qu Yuan, Li Bai, Su Shi, Shakespeare, Beethoven, van Gogh, Jimmy Carter, Audrey Hepburn, and others all serve as heroes and heroines in his works. His lyrical essay "Ghost Rain" (*Guiyu*, 1963)¹⁵ aptly demonstrates, once again, his transcultural contemplation. Upon being informed of the death of his infant son in

the hospital, Yu, as a professor of English, reads to his students an elegy, "Fear No More," from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*:

No exorciser harm thee!
Nor no witchcraft charm thee!
Ghost unlaid forbear thee!
Nothing ill come near thee!

He then tells the students that all men are afraid of death: from Shakespeare to Li He (790–816) to John Keats to Dylan Thomas. In a manner close to stream-of-consciousness, Yu recites the Tang poet Li He's lines "How sad is the South Hill / Where ghost rains fell on empty grass!" The line "But the rain is full of ghosts tonight" by Edna St. Vincent Millay is also brought to his mind. Death, a universal phenomenon, comes sooner or later to everyone. Grief-stricken, the author draws upon as many poets and poems from different cultures as he can to help console himself, achieving a catharsis, as it were. One may note that the essay "Ghost Rain," dexterously penned and very touching, serves to illustrate the claim that a sick oyster turns itself into a pearl, as previously cited.

Huang Guobin is another distinguished and prolific writer with more than twenty published volumes in poetry, prose, criticism, and translation. Born and educated in Hong Kong, he is now a professor of literature and translation. A master of the Chinese and English languages, Huang also reads French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Greek. He has spent years immersing himself in the works of great Chinese and Western poets such as Qu Yuan, Tao Qian, Li Bai, Du Fu, Homer, Shakespeare, Dante, and W. B. Yeats, and has written monographs and articles about them.

Illuminating his notion of literary greatness, he cites from both the Chinese and Western traditions works such as *The Songs of the South*, *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *The Iliad*, *The Divine Comedy*, *King Lear*, and *War and Peace* as touchstones. Often, in his explication of works and ideas, one literary tradition is used to reflect and compare with another. He observes that sublimity and the grand style are present in the West as well as in the East. In a pamphlet about Chinese and Western love poetry, Huang remarks,

Thus from times ancient to present, from the East to the West, there echo the lovers' prattles, ravings, grievances and moanings, under the arrows of Eros; there echoes the calling of this half for the second half When there is someone in Loyang [in China] who says . . . , someone at La Seine responds When women from the North-western part [of China] of the Six Dynasties sing . . . , answers come from the American poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Girls in China are as romantic and passionate . . . as their counterparts in the West.¹⁶

When Huang writes his informal essays for the literary supplements of daily newspapers, he again, as a rule, lets the East meet the West. Therefore, in his "Encounters of the Geniuses" (*Tiancai xiangyu*), Dante, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot are found together with Li Bai and Du Fu; in "Secrets" (*Mimi*),¹⁷ *Zhuang Zi* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* are quoted side by side with the Bible and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The secret about Chinese and Western culture is, one may infer from Huang's view, that secrets are kept and broken by people regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

The above three scholar-writers share a common background. All of them started to learn English in their childhood and acquired proficiency in other languages in their youth and adulthood. Qian spent a couple of years in his twenties studying in Europe; in his thirties and forties, Yu studied and taught at various universities in the United States for a total of five years; in his forties, Huang studied and taught for six years in Canada. Their sojourns in Western countries certainly helped them broaden their perception of the West. Even if they had not spent any time in the West, they would have learned Western literature and culture at home all the same, since Western culture is accessible to the Chinese people in the major Chinese cities through schools and mass media. In the case of Hong Kong, a British colony since 1842, it is particularly convenient for its young residents to receive a Western-style education. Of all the Chinese communities in the world, Hong Kong, whose population is more than 95 percent Chinese, is perhaps best described as a truly bilingual city, where Chinese and English are taught and used for commercial and academic purposes.

To qualify as an intellectual in China in the twentieth century, one has to have, apart from Chinese learning, a considerable amount of knowledge of Western culture; some years of study in Europe or the United States is beneficial to his qualification as such. Therefore, modern Chinese intellectuals think more or less multiculturally. Nevertheless, the broad-visioned Qian Zhongshu, Yu Guangzhong, and Huang Guobin are outstanding in terms of their vast learning and multilingual ability.

Multiculturalism in China is a naturally evolved phenomenon. Although China was invaded militarily by imperialistic forces, Chinese intellectuals generally do not consider their acquaintance with Western culture a result of Western imperialism. In modern history, when China as a nation was weak and on the verge of collapse, certain patriotic Chinese intellectuals, including zealots for Western culture, advocated total Westernization as a means to save the nation. At other times, Chinese intellectuals have regarded Western culture as something for them to learn from, to compare against, and to enrich their own tradition with. We should also note that Chinese culture has influenced other cultures in the past and that it is likely to make an impact in the future.

III. Globalization, Chinese Literature, and the Creative Imagination

A. Westernization, Globalization, and the Global Culture

Decades ago, for the non-Western countries in the world, Westernization was a movement that meant progress. Another word, "modernization," was also used, carrying a similar meaning. Later still, another word, "internationalization," became in vogue; this word sounds better because instead of emphasizing Western influences, it implies that progress is not only achievable by all but that it is most likely to take place in an atmosphere of interdependence. Rhetoric often changes with, among other things, politics and economic developments. Now, with the apparent economic successes of the countries of the Asia-Pacific Rim and the recognition that their cultures are contributing to these achievements, the new concept is "globalization."

That is, the technological and economic transformation of the entire world.

Edward Said observed in the late 1970s that “the felt tendencies of contemporary culture in the Near East are guided by European and American models.”¹⁸ One may add that this was also true of the Far East. (To be geographically and semantically correct, the Near East and the Far East should be called West Asia and East Asia, respectively.) This is still true. In general terms, the rest of the world today is still guided, materially and intellectually, by European and American models. Pierre Cardin, Mercedes-Benz, and IBM are still highly prestigious brand names coveted by consumers worldwide — just as they were in the past. The popular deconstruction, new historicism, and so on have come onto the stage of literary criticism from the West — not from West Asia or East Asia. And Bill Gates, the computer superwizard and superbillionaire, is leading the world of “cyberspace” from his home base in the United States, not from Asia or Africa. However, both West Asia and East Asia are growing in economic and political power, East Asia doing extraordinarily well. This being the case, Asia is a continent to be reckoned with. Political and business leaders in the world are now learning to think and to act on a global basis. Therefore, we have global economy, global politics, global computer superhighways, and global citizenship; we have global views, global agendas, and, in short, globalization.

Westernization and globalization are two different concepts; yet, in substance, globalization, as it is now understood, does not differ much from Westernization, which is decades old. While Westernization sounds European and American-centered, globalization is semantically neutral, sidestepping any differential in power. It is useful to deploy the term “globalization” in place of the older ones, and those who have popularized this term should be lauded.

So, we are now in the new era of globalization. The brave new world is a globe, which is as big as the planet Earth and as small as a village — the so-called global village, to use Marshall McLuhan’s term. In this new era, we have a global culture. But what is a—or the—global culture? Before answering this question, one needs to take one step back and ask, What is Chinese culture? Similarly, one must ask, What is American culture?

These questions are difficult to answer. It is at least doubly difficult to define global culture. When one views the myriad cultures on earth from the angle of "sameness," one finds that there is a great deal of likeness and correspondence among them; however, when one approaches them from an angle of "difference," there is also an inexhaustible list of differences and contradictions. Let me try to respond to this formidable question this way: global culture means the coexistence and blending of the different cultures on earth. In global culture, there are certain ideas, trends, and values that are common to most nations and that enjoy more popularity than others; as science and technology advance, and as people communicate with and understand each other better, the quantity of common ideas, trends, and values increases. However, this is not to say that in global culture there is no place for the unique characteristics and colors of the various national traditions.

B. Common Values and Concerns

I believe in the existence of common ideas and values among different cultures. All cultures cherish peace and harmony, regardless of nationalities and race, and we denounce hatred and war. But in the late twentieth century, the reach of the information and entertainment industries has created a global audience. Television screens around the world seem to display the same programming and style. Ancient and particular cultural artifacts are reclaimed and then offered to various audiences. For instance, during the Gulf War in 1990, a Chinese classic entitled *The Art of War* (*Sun Zi bingfa*) by Sun Zi (fifth century B.C.) was made required reading for American soldiers. The reason for this is that many of the ideas in this Chinese classic are still pertinent to twentieth-century warfare. Currently in the United States, the Homeric epic *The Iliad* is recommended reading for business executives eager to revisit the virtue of fairness. This is also the case with the traditional Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Here also, fairness is essential to statecraft. The point is that fairness is a common human virtue.

With regard to love, the poem quoted at the beginning of this essay is worthy of a rereading. The fair-lady theme of that poem echoes in later generations and in other cultures. Juliet is the fair

lady for Romeo, and Francesca for Robert Kincaid in the best-selling *The Bridges of the Madison County*. Perhaps one can rewrite the ancient Chinese poem to read something like this:

“Fair, fair,” cry the blue wrens,
On a bridge of the Madison County.
Pretty is this mid-age lady,
Fit love—the wandering man’s.

Here I would like to make some further comments on this ancient Chinese poem. The poem has a total of four stanzas; each stanza has four lines, which is called a quatrain. In the original Chinese text, the first, second, and fourth lines of the stanza are rhymed. We observe that the quatrain is one of the most common forms of versification; apart from its extensive use in Chinese literature, Dryden, Johnson, and Tennyson in English literature all use it; Omar Khayyam in Persian literature also uses it. In Fitz Gerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat*, the rhyming scheme of *aaba* is exactly the same as that of our ancient Chinese poem under discussion. In other words, the theme of love and the form of quatrain in this poem represent the existence of a common institution and shared values, which we label as universal, or, if you prefer, global.

The use of metaphor—the comparison of the lady and lord to crying ospreys—is also a common practice in literature of all ages. In classical Chinese poetics, metaphor is considered to be one of the three most frequently employed rhetorical devices. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle states that the use of metaphor is one of the three most important principles in the art of persuasion; he further notes that “the creation of metaphor is a mark of genius.” The list of commonly valued ideas and artistic skills in literature is too long to complete: poetry is the expression of the heart and the mind; its functions are to instruct and to amuse; it aims to help make society harmonious and peaceful; the creative imagination and a well-wrought form are essential to good poetry.¹⁹ The erudite Qian Zhongshu observes that “there is common thinking between people of the East Sea and the West Sea.”²⁰ The renowned Chinese historian Qian Mu (1895–1990), founder of New Asia College in Hong Kong, maintains that “there are sages all over the Four Seas,”²¹ meaning that virtues

are found in all the corners of the world, regardless of nationality and race. More than two thousand years ago, Confucius already envisioned a society of the “Grand Union” (*datong*) where fairness, kindness, and compassion are the guiding spirit.²² These virtues are equally cherished by all Utopian societies both in the Eastern and Western imaginations.

For contemporary Chinese intellectuals whose ancestors advocated the “Grand Union,” and who themselves have broad visions and think multiculturally, globalization is a natural and desirable development for humankind. However, Chinese intellectuals would ask that, in the process of globalization, Chinese culture as a major civilization be given due respect and play a more important role than it has. It is a pity that there is a total lack of attention paid by the West to the great Chinese works of literary criticism, such as Liu Xie’s *The Literary Mind and Carving of Dragons*. As far as I know, there has never been any mention or citation of this masterpiece in any history or anthology of literary criticism produced in the West. If global culture means an intelligent selection and assimilation of the best from all cultures on earth, then I deem it a great loss that *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* is missing.

I concur with R. Z. Sheppard, in his remarks on the Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, that “no part of the contemporary world is free of profound influences from another.”²³ And I believe that the non-Western cultures—“the Other” in Edward Said’s terminology—should have voices and exert influences in building up and enriching the global culture. Take the United States, for instance; although this country is still regarded by a significant number of intellectuals as culturally imperialistic, there are pleas from American scholars in fields like history and literature that Americans should broaden their view²⁴ and that they “can no longer afford to ignore the strengths of other faiths and civilizations.”²⁵ And there are actual changes in college curricula in this direction. Given this age of “intensive cultural interpenetrations,”²⁶ I believe that development toward a “Grand Union” is in progress.

We have already had a great number of common values and concerns — the global agenda lists such items as democracy, human rights (including women’s rights), environmental protection, and so on. Contemporary Chinese writers do subscribe,

in varying degrees, to these goals. Take, for instance, this poem on environmental protection written by Yu Guangzhong, titled "Shell's Sand" (*Beike sha*):

The white sand beach is a sea-land exchange.
Look at Poseidon's booth, so rich
With exquisite corals and shells,
Ground by wind and wave from time antique,
Rubbed slow and fine by tiny sand, and washed
Into tints that charm whoever looks.
Whose box is it, nymph, that squanders
So many, many gifts on us?
And what could man offer in exchange
Except such holiday trash
As empty beer bottles and broken cigarette packs?²⁷

Here, two images — the beach and the trading center — are metaphorically linked together, again testifying to the poet's remarkable imagination. Eloquently but subduedly, Yu criticizes the polluters of the beach for enjoying the beautiful gifts from nature but not returning presents of similar charms. This poem can be understood and appreciated by people of all nations. Its readers would agree with the environmental theme and also with the idea of repaying other people's kindnesses, which should be a global virtue. Many other examples can be cited to demonstrate that contemporary Chinese writers do address themselves to a wide readership on global concerns and, in so doing, can still bring into full play their individual power of imagination, the indispensable poetic faculty.

C. Individual and National Characteristics

Cyberspace technology is revolutionizing the concept of distance and, consequently, creating new intimacies. Yet besides the sameness, there is diversity and uniqueness. As the power of imagination works with the association of images not readily available to the poet, which necessarily involves memory of things past, the poet can never separate himself from his traditional culture. Thus, to borrow from T. S. Eliot, with all his individual talent, the poet, in order to qualify as a good poet beyond

his twenty-five years of age, must become part of the tradition. Qian Zhongshu, Yu Guangzhong, and Huang Guobin have all been greatly nourished by the Chinese tradition. This tradition, the Chinese cultural heritage, is built into their works.

While he was a visiting professor at a Michigan college, Yu Guangzhong wrote "When I Am Dead" (*Dang wo si shi*, 1966),²⁸ expressing his profound feeling toward his motherland, a passion that C. T. Hsia characterizes as "the obsession with China" of many modern Chinese intellectuals.²⁹ This is the poem:

When I am dead, lay me down between the Yangtze
And the Yellow River and pillow my head
On China, white hair against black soil,
Most beautiful O most maternal of lands,
And I will sleep my soundest taking
The whole mainland for my cradle, lulled
By the mother-hum that rises on both sides
From the two great rivers, two long, long songs
That on and on flow forever to the East.
This the world's most indulgent roomiest bed
Where, content, heart pauses to rest
And recalls how, of a Michigan winter night,
A youth from China used to keep
Intense watch towards the East, trying
To pierce his look through darkness for the dawn
Of China. So with hungry eyes he devoured
The map, eyes for seventeen years starved
For a glimpse of home, and like a new weaned child
He drank with one wild gulp rivers and lakes
From the mouth of Yangtze all the way up
To Poyang and Tung'ing and to Koko Nor.³⁰

At the time Yu wrote this poem, Mainland China was on the brink of the disastrous Cultural Revolution. Nonetheless, the poet from Taiwan, residing temporarily in the United States, says that when he dies he wishes to be buried on the Mainland. Having spent years in a foreign country and being very nostalgic, the poet finally rests in peace on the "most maternal of lands." This poem reflects the idea of "the fallen leaf returning to its native roots and soil," an idea considered very "Chinese." Apart from this sentiment, we also find in this poem the Yangtze

River, the Yellow River, Poyang, Tungt'ing, and Koko Nor, which are unmistakably geographical names in China; in particular, the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers are symbols of the Chinese civilization. Death is a common theme in all literatures — in his "Sailing to Byzantium," W. B. Yeats tells of the birds and poets singing about "whatever is begotten, born, and dies," and this reminds us of the Buddhist Four Pains of Life, that is, birth, agedness, sickness, and death; but Yu's "When I Am Dead" surely has its individual and national color.

The Chinese regulated verse (*lushi*), for example, an important poetic form since the Tang dynasty, is unique in its strict prosodic and linguistic requirements. Although the vernacular poetry (or new poetry, which is basically free verse) since the May Fourth Movement has been regarded as the mainstream of twentieth-century Chinese poetry, regulated verse — or, more generally speaking, classical-style Chinese poetry — is still used as a form in contemporary Chinese versification. Among the eight lines of a poem written in regulated verse, there are two antithetical couplets — the third and fourth lines forming one couplet, and the fifth and the sixth the other. The antithetical couplet is uniquely Chinese, not found in any other literature on earth. From Du Fu and Li Shangyin (813?–858) to Qian Zhongshu, Chinese poets take pains in composing and refining their antithetical couplets in poems written in regulated verse. The Chinese also compose antithetical couplets, not as part of a poem but as independent poetic entities, or, rather, as "mini poems." In addition to the feelings and sentiments that are essential to poetic writing, this requires craftsmanship. A well-wrought antithetical couplet serves to mark elegantly a special occasion or to embellish a building. It can instruct and entertain; it connotes a sense of cultural refinement. The antithetical couplet can be very ornate and allusive; it can also be plain, simple, and accessible to the general public.³¹ Lately, the famous Sichuan writer Liu Shahe (1931 –), who composes new poems and essays, has found himself a new interest in making antithetical couplets. One of his "mini poems," which I cheerfully discovered during my recent trip to Sichuan, reads,

Fashionable, you take the lift-up-can drink;
Conservative, I have the covered-cup tea.

His “conservativeness” has a sense of conservation — by using the traditional china cup he will not waste metals as do the “fashionable” people who take the aluminum-can drinks. Probably owing its origins to the yin-yang philosophy of ancient China, the antithetical couplet is a “mini poem” as well as a common rhetorical device. Phrases and sentences of an antithetical nature often appear in modern writings — evidence that modernity does not necessarily mean breaking with the past. One notes that in Yu Guangzhong’s poem “When I Am Dead,” the poet has his “white hair [set] against black soil,” in which the “white hair” and “black soil” are antithetical.

If one can have a double identity, there should be no conflict between being a global citizen and a citizen of a particular country. With a broad and global vision, one contributes to both one’s country and to the globe. In this era of globalization, writers, be they Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Arab, or any other nationality, tell the human stories of birth, love, and death with all the power of their creative imagination, addressing themselves to the common values and concerns of humanity while retaining individual and national characteristics.³²

Notes

1. Quoted from Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs* (New York: Grove Press, 1960): 81.
2. The sentences are from Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*. Quoted from *Criticism: The Major Texts*, ed. W. J. Bate (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970): 379.
3. The translation is by Shih-hsiang Chen. Quoted from Cyril Birch, ed., *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Grove Press, 1965): 205–06.
4. Vincent Yu-chung Shih, translator and annotator, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1983): 154.
5. *Ibid.*, 299.
6. *Ibid.*, 301 and 303.
7. The translation is by Wu-chi Liu; quoted from *Sunflower Splendor: Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry*, ed. Wu-chi Liu and Irving Yucheng Lo (New York: Anchor Books, 1975): 23–24.
8. The translation is by Irving Y. Lo; *ibid.*, 110.
9. See Wai-leung Wong, “Anglo-American Influences on Chinese New Poetry in the May Fourth Period” (written in Chinese) in his *Essays on Chinese Literature* (*Zhongguo wenxue zonghenglun*) (Taipei: Dongda Tushu Gongsì, 1988).

10. In a personal letter to this author (dated 31 July 1979), Qian Zhongshu, whom I shall discuss below, quotes this remark by a German scholar of philosophy in criticizing a certain English philosopher. Qian uses this remark to denounce the works of some contemporary literary critics.

11. The metaphoric title of the book can be translated as *Humble Observations: A Collection of Commentaries*. The book was published in four volumes, consisting of hundreds of items that are Qian's commentaries on the major classical Chinese texts. The commentaries are made from a Chinese-Western perspective, concerning literature, history, philosophy, and other humanistic disciplines.

12. There is an English version of this essay, translated by Siu-kit Wong, that appears in *Renditions* (Spring and Autumn 1984): 21–40.

13. Jeane Kelly and Nathan K. Mao, trans., *Fortress Besieged* (Bloomington, Ind., and London: Indiana University Press, 1979): 91.

14. The two articles are collected, respectively, in Yu's *Wangxiang de mushen* (Hong Kong: Zhengwen Chubanshe, 1968) and Yu et al., *Sihai ji* (Taipei: Huangguan Chubanshe, 1986).

15. "Guiyu" is collected in Yu's *Xiaoyao you* (Taipei: Wenxing Shudian, 1965).

16. Huang Guobin, *Qianban meigui: Zhongwai qingshi mantan* (Hong Kong: Xuejin Shudian, 1984): 4–7.

17. These two essays are collected in Huang's *Fengxiang* (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju, 1994).

18. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979): 323.

19. Literature is more often than not deemed to have its functions. This view can be found in many places. I cite a recent example representing the opinion of Ron Rebbholz of Stanford University. Addressing the 1994 graduates, Rebbholz says that the reading of great literature will "further enrich your already rich humanity and, with compassionate wisdom, enrich the humanity of all those who are close to you and all those, even though they are strangers, who need your beautiful strengths to work, lovingly, for justice." These words are quoted from the Newsletter of the Department of English at Stanford University (vol. 16, no. 1, 1994): 5.

20. Qian's preface to his *Tanyi lu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1984).

21. Quoted from Qian Mu's lyric for the school song of New Asia College.

22. The famous passage on "*datong*" is part of the chapter "*Liyun*" in *The Book of Rites (Liji)*, a Confucian classic.

23. R. Z. Sheppard, "Wide Horizons: Mexico's Poet-Critic-Humanist," *Time* (22 October 1990): 41.

24. In his article "Confucianism and Multiculturalism" (its Chinese version appears in *Hanxue yanjiu tongxun*, December 1994), William deBary, a Columbia University professor emeritus and a noted sinologist, mentions that in a conference held at the University of Hawaii a few years earlier, he suggested that information about major civilizations of Asia be included in the syllabi of the required courses offered at the universities in the United States. In "The

Bernheimer Report, 1993: *Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century*," it is stated,

Department and program chairs should actively recruit faculty from non-European literature departments and from allied disciplines to teach courses and to collaborate in broadening the cultural scope of comparative literature offering. In all contexts of its practice, multiculturalism should be approached not as a politically correct way of acquiring more or less picturesque information about others whom we don't really want to know but as a tool to promote significant reflection on cultural relations, translations, dialogue, and debate.

See Charles Bernheimer, ed., *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 45.

25. Yue-him Tam's response to Yoshikazu Sakamoto's "The Long Transformation for a Democratic World Order," *Macalester International* 1 (Spring 1995): 228.

26. Editor's Note in *Macalester International* 1 (Spring 1995): xiv.

27. The translation is by the poet himself. Quoted from Yu Kwang-chung (Yu Guangzhong), *The Night Watchman: A Bilingual Selection of Poems (1958–1992)* (Taipei: Chiu Ko Publishing Co., 1992): 121.

28. *Ibid.*, 25.

29. See C. T. Hsia, "Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature" in his *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1961): 533–44.

30. In the two lines of the antithetical couplet, each line matches the other in terms of the number of characters, the part of speech, and the tonal pattern of the characters in the corresponding positions; moreover, the two lines are supposed to be opposite (antithetical) in meaning.

31. There has been a revival of interest in traditional Chinese prosody in Mainland China, including the regulated verse and the antithetical couplet. For instance, the bimonthly *Dui Lian (Antithetical Couplet)* has been in publication since 1985.

32. In recent years, in U.S. sinological circles, there have been discussions on the Chinese color of contemporary Chinese literature and other related matters in this world of multiculturalism; see Stephen Owen, "What is World Poetry?: The Anxiety of Global Influence," *New Republic* (19 November 1990): 28–32; Andrew F. Jones, "Chinese Literature in the 'World' Literary Economy," *Modern Chinese Literature* 8 (1994): 171–90.

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