


About Chinese-Western Comparative Poetics: A Review Article on Liu's, Miner's, Owen's, and Yip's Work

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## Recommended Citation

Cao, Yina. "About Chinese-Western Comparative Poetics: A Review Article on Liu's, Miner's, Owen's, and Yip's Work." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17.1 (2015): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2717>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2717)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture** 

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
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**Volume 17 Issue 1 (March 2015) Review Article 13**

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss1/13>>

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 17.1 (2015)**  
Thematic Issue ***The Study of Chinese Literature in the Anglophone World***. Ed. Shunqing Cao  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss1/>>

Yina CAO

### **About Chinese-Western Comparative Poetics: A Review Article on Liu's, Miner's, Owen's, and Yip's Work**

According to *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, in modern usage poetics refers to "the general theory of literature" (Childs and Fowler 179) and its purpose is to identify the literariness or the "essence" of literature. Hence comparative poetics can be understood one of the frameworks of the comparative study of literature: "Comparative poetics means research and exploration into fundamental issues of literary theory from a comparative and intercultural perspective" (Wang 418). In the review article at hand, I discuss the work of scholars whose scholarship exerted both influence and controversy in Chinese scholarship, namely the scholarship of James J.Y. Liu (1926-1986), Earl Miner (1927-2004), Stephen Owen (1946), and Wai-lim Yip (1937-).

In many ways James J.Y. Liu's scholarship represents pioneering work in the development of Chinese-Western comparative poetics. He taught at several US-American universities including Stanford University where he remained until his death. His most important books include *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (1962), *The Poetry of Li Shang-Ying* (1969), *Major Lyricists of the Northern Song* (1974), *Chinese Theories of Literature* (1975), *Essentials of Chinese Literature Art* (1979), and *Language-Paradox-Poetics: A Chinese Perspective* (1988). Liu's project to construct a systematic poetics for Chinese literature can be sensed in *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, which received attention in the English-speaking world and has been viewed as one of the classics of Sinology (see also "Towards"). In this book, with his sound knowledge of both Chinese and Western literary theories, he uses terminologies familiar to Western readers in order to introduce and interpret traditional Chinese poetics. Liu's early efforts anticipated his later more influential work *Chinese Theories of Literature*. For the purpose of introducing the Chinese poetics to Western readers and melting it into the genealogy of the world poetics, Liu furthered his pursuit to find a framework familiar to Western readers and he borrowed the poetic system founded by M.H. Abrams in his *The Mirror and The Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* as the foundational theoretical structure for his *Chinese Theories of Literature*. Liu did this with a careful consideration of the differences between Chinese and Western poetics. He modified Abrams's poetical triangle into a "tetradic circle" that is around four elements: world, writer, works, and readers derived from the Abram's four elements and shows an affinity with traditional Chinese poetics (see also Huang and Tong). Based on this modified structure, Liu took up categorization he used in his previous work to divide Chinese literary theory into six categories: metaphysical, deterministic, expressive, technical, aesthetic, and pragmatic. He aimed to provide a basis to establish a general schematization of literary theory as a kind of world poetics. *Chinese Theories of Literature* exerted great influence in both the English- and Chinese-speaking world. After *Chinese Theories of Literature* was read in China in the 1980s, it became welcomed by scholars of Chinese literature and comparative literature. In 1981 it had its first Chinese version published in Taipei and later it had another two Chinese versions published on Mainland China. As Yan Zhang summarizes, Liu's *Chinese Theories of Literature* "manifests a breakthrough a Chinese American scholar can make in the context of Western scholarship and a new direction for the study of ancient Chinese literary theory" ("中国文学理论—书体现了一个华裔学者试图在西方学术语境包裹下的艰难突围，并由此开拓了一个中国古代文论研究的新路径" [37]; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine).

Earl Miner taught at Princeton University and was president of the International Comparative Literature Association / Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée. Although he was and is widely praised and valued for his scholarship about European literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and especially for his work in Japanese classical literature, he is viewed as a pioneer of Chinese-Western comparative poetics. This is mainly owing to his 1990 *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature*—translated to Chinese in 1998 by Yugen Wang (王宇根) and Weijie Song (宋伟杰)—and his initiatives in propelling the development of Chinese-Western comparative literature in China. *Comparative Poetics* is not a discussion in general on the basic principles and methods of comparative poetics, but a reexamination of the Western literary thought from the perspective of literary genres through interpretations of a large number of cross-cultural examples. The basic theoretical starting point of the book is to establish an intercultural poetical system, which, ac-

According to Miner, should be based on the concept of genre since it has a dominant position in literature: "The thesis of this essay is that an originative poetics develops when a critic or critics of insight defines the nature and conditions of literature in terms of the then most esteemed genre" (7). Miner points out that the Western poetic system is based on the Greek drama, while the Oriental poetics such as Chinese and Japanese poetics is established on the basis of the lyric. He refers to these genres as the "foundation genres" and those poetics based on them as "originative poetics." Western scholars immersed in the original Western poetics that is rooted in Aristotle's mimesis are often inclined to hold that Western poetics has a universal validity. However, Miner comes to a different conclusion pointing out the reason Western mimetic poetics has been dominating the field of poetics and that this is not because mimetic poetics itself has universal truthfulness, but because of the fact that the dominant genre at the original stage of Western poetics is nothing else but drama. Miner's *Comparative Poetics* aroused widespread interest and discussion in Chinese and Japanese scholarship. For example, Makoto Ueda wrote that "Such intercultural generalizations have the effect of leading us to ponder critical issues at a level free from ethnocentrism" (288), Antony Tatlow, wrote that Miner's book was the first attempt of a real cross-cultural discussion (Tatlow qtd. in Wang and Song 369), Ning Wang wrote that "His intercultural studies of comparative literature and theory has far surpassed many of his precursors or contemporaries such as René Etiemble, Douwe Fokkema and James Liu" (424).

Stephen Owen taught at Harvard University and is the author, among others, of *The Poetry of the Early T'ang* (1977), *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang* (1981), *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (1985), *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (1986), *The End of the Chinese 'Middle Ages': Essays in Mid-Tang Literary Culture* (1996), *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century (827-860)* (2006). These books achieved great success in both English- and Chinese-language Sinology. Under the principles of mutual respect and understanding in dealing with heterogeneous cultures, Owen studied Chinese literature through a trans-cultural perspective thus melting the borders of Sinology and comparative literature. Owen's most important contribution to Chinese-Western comparative poetics is his 1992 *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*. Based on his over ten years' experience of teaching Chinese literature theory, Owen compiled, translated, and annotated his classical Chinese literary theory reader and the book is one of the authoritative guides to students of Chinese literature at many US-American universities. In China it is listed in the required reading materials for students in departments of comparative literature, world literature, and Chinese literature. The book has its peculiar features and values in many aspects: "The book aims at introducing Chinese literary criticism to those students who are learning Western literary theory and criticism. But it has another purpose—trying to provide an alternative research method" (*Chinese Literary Theory* 1). Owen does not want to take criticism as a container of ideas; instead, he attempts to show the real face of ideological texts: literary texts are in fact the process of movement and evolution of literary notions and thought and they are constantly in the process of modification and change so that they can never be simply reduced to concepts that are stable. This method is different with what James Liu did in *Chinese Theories of Literature* in that the latter used taxonomy to excerpt primary Chinese literary texts and then impose on them Western literary concepts. On the contrary, Owen aimed at telling a story of the literary. Significantly, Owen abandoned the idea of compiling a book of Chinese literary theory as a book of "history of ideas," a popular method used by many scholars in the Chinese-speaking world during that time. Instead, he chose classical Chinese texts as the starting point to access Chinese literary thought. Owen's practice of going back to original texts is praised by Chinese scholars not only because Owen has adopted a method of "close reading" familiar to Chinese scholars in the field of classical Chinese literature, but also because he has shown with his method a respect for the Chinese literary tradition. As Xiaolu Wang and Dongdong Shi wrote, "This kind of rendering and interpretation of texts embodies Owen's respects for a different cultural tradition and a discourse mixing life experiences and rational thinking that is peculiar to literary studies. It represents a new research paradigm of Chinese literary studies ("这种解读与阐释体现了宇文所安尊重不同文化传统本身的态度，以及尊重文学研究所独有的生命体验与理性思维并重的话语思维模式，代表了中国文学研究一种新的研究范式" [56]). Owen's method used in his *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* is a contribution to Chinese-Western comparative poetics because 1) it breaks the misunderstanding that

comparative poetics is simply an practice of using Western theories to interpret Chinese literary phenomena and 2) because the book provides an excellent example for equal dialogue and interaction between Chinese and Western poetics.

With the development of comparative literature in China, Chinese-Western comparative poetics has attracted attention from mainland and overseas scholars and Wai-lim Yip is one of the most influential scholars who contributed a lot to the field. As a scholar, a bilingual poet, and translator, he had a unique life experience and achieved in poetry writing, comparative poetics, and comparative literature. His reputation in Chinese-Western comparative poetics is established by his 1983 *比较诗学* (Comparative Poetics) and his 1993 *Diffusion of Distances: Dialogues Between Chinese and Western Poetics* (1993). Since his early engagement in writing on Ezra Pound's translations of Chinese poetry, Yip was aware of the problems of translation in cross-cultural contexts. He was disappointed with most English translations of Chinese poetry because he had found nothing but "formidable distortions of the Chinese indigenous aesthetic horizon in treacherous modes of representation" (*Diffusion* 2). Later he investigated the horizons of both the source and target language in translation and sought to discover the deep-rooted cultural thinking in a specific language. Yip's advocacy of the study of cultural models is based on his special perspective of comparative poetics: "The lack of awareness of differences in models will, at certain crucial moments, lead the scholar to judge the wrong things for the wrong cultural-aesthetic reasons" (*Diffusion* 3). Therefore, Yip questions the legitimacy of the application of various Western literary theories on the study of Chinese literature. Through his emphasis on the use of the similarities and differences of knowledge to affirm Chinese classical aesthetics, he tried to find a more reasonable "common poetics" by both Chinese and Western "cultural models" and "common aesthetic grounds" (Comparative 1). According to Yip, it is impossible to find common aesthetic grounds just by using one model that is specific to one culture: "We must begin simultaneously with two or three models, comparing and contrasting them with full respect and attention to the indigenous 'peculiarities' and cultural 'anomalies'" (*Diffusion* 17). Taking the metaphoric structure in poetry as an example, Yip holds that the metaphoric structure is central in Western poetry, but only secondary and sometimes even absent in Chinese poetry and that this phenomenon is determined by different cultural models: the former is human oriented while the latter is Taoist oriented. His use of models played a vital role in the development of Chinese-Western comparative poetics in China in the 1980s and 1990s when many Chinese comparatists were enthusiastic in exploring theoretical bases for a Chinese school of comparative literature. For them, Yip's approach of cultural models suggested an appropriate framework to combat the dominance of Western literary theory.

In conclusion, since the 1980s Chinese-Western comparative poetics has been viewed as one of the prominent fields of comparative literature in Mainland China. The contributions of above scholars to Chinese-Western comparative poetics should not be neglected as they have brought new perspectives for comparative literature. No matter how different the Chinese poetics is from Western poetics in basic concepts or approaches, there is common ground for them—the pursuit of aesthetic nature, which could be viewed as the "commensurability" as pursued by comparatists. Recent decades have witnessed the impact of globalization in all aspects of the economy, society, and culture. In China we are often warned that we should be alert to "Westernization" usually camouflaged behind the mask of globalization and that we should be careful of West-centrism imposed or self-imposed in doing scholarship. In this sense, the achievements of scholars and present practitioners in comparative poetics are worthy of consideration and respect. US-American scholars in Chinese-Western comparative poetics offered unique perspectives which are bound to be different from those of Chinese comparatists. Based on the principle of equal dialogue between different cultures and literatures, we can draw some on approaches by Western scholars including the scholars whose work I review here. First and foremost, a "mutual hermeneutic method" is necessary and valid for doing Chinese-Western comparison. Since Chinese literary theory and Western literary theory are formed in two different cultural contexts, mutual influence has been rare and hence I posit that the work of above scholars is not only relevant, but important. Second, "intercultural studies" is both an effective approach and a basic principle of comparative literature and this is particularly important for Chinese-Western comparative poetics. Third, the "integrative approach" is perhaps the most important for comparative poetics. This approach goes beyond the paradox contained in "comparison"—one of the key concepts of comparative

poetics in that it rejects both the "sameness" as Liu did—and "difference" as Owen did; instead, the method aims at establishing a platform for Chinese literary theory and Western literary theory to treat each other as a frame of reference and to enlighten each other with their own peculiarities.

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