



Cross-cultural Interpretation and Chinese Literature: A Book Review Article on Owen's Work in Sinology


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Qingben LI and Jinghua GUO

Cross-cultural Interpretation and Chinese Literature: A Book Review Article on Owen's Work in Sinology

Sinology (汉学) refers to non-Chinese scholarship, while Chinese National Culture Studies (国学) refers to Chinese scholarship conducted by Chinese scholars themselves. In recent years, research by US-American Sinologist Stephen Owen has received attention from Chinese scholars. Importantly, his construction and application of a system for the history of poetry during the Tang Dynasty has more or less broken the stereotyped perception of US-American Sinology as perceived in Mainland China. In this book review we discuss some of Owen's works and their impact on Chinese scholarship. Owen studied at the Department of East Asian Languages and Literature of Yale University and obtained his PhD with a dissertation entitled *Poetries by Meng Jiao and Han Yu* in 1972. In 1982 he began to teach in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilization, as well as the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard University. In his research he explores the historical development of Chinese literature and artistic contents and meaning crossing the Chinese and Western binary opposition. Owen focuses on the method of cross-cultural interpretation to reveal the significance of Chinese literature itself in order to understand the universal value of Chinese aesthetics.

Owen's cultural background makes it inevitable to adopt Western cultural consciousness just as other US-American scholars did when they carried out literary study for the reason that their initial goal for their engagement in Chinese literary studies must be of serves for the Western readers. Precisely because of this, the methodological approach adopted in his studies on Chinese literature is easier for Western readers to understand. For example, in one of his books he chose the term "Middle Ages" because "this title is a useful starting point for English readers" (*The End* 1). With respect to the interpretation of specific works, Owen transcends genres and perspectives of Western theories focusing instead on the analysis of literary texts without distractions, a feature Chinese scholarship also shares. His cross-cultural interpretation of Chinese literature has significance upon scholarship in China, even with the presence of certain occasional misreading. Owen's initial research on Chinese literature followed apparently the "close reading" of the new criticism. However, this "close reading" in his study of the poetry of the Tang Dynasty is different from new criticism, because he did not focus only on the text and thereby cutting off authorship and reception from the interpretative process. While paying attention to text analysis, Owen never leaves out the historical background, the author's intention or the text's reception. Curiously, certain aspects related to "misreading" in cross-cultural communication can be found in "Remembering Li Po on a Spring Day" by Du Fu, one of Owen's objects of study:

白也诗无敌	Po it is-no rival in poetry,
飘然思不群	Wind-tossed, thoughts unlike the Crowd's.
清新庾开府	Clear and fresh: a colonel Yu Hsin,
俊逸鲍参军	Noble, aloof: Pao Chao the officer.
渭北春天树	Trees in spring's sky, north of the Wei
江东日暮云	The clouds of sundown in Chiang-tung
何时一樽酒	When shall we share a goblet of wine
重与细论文	And, together again, discuss fine points of writing.

(Trans. Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese* 212-13)

Traditionally, the poem is considered to express Du Fu's concern for his friend Li Po (Li Bai 701-762). Owen, however, reads in Du Fu's praise of his friend as an inner aspiration of competition and explains that "inside the simple praise poem, pride writes a very different poem- by a slight shift in tone of the written voice, by a certain allusion coming unbidden to mind, by a particular phrase forming itself by chance. Our pleasure in the text is in the simultaneous unfolding of the two contradictory poems-the generous, respectable outer text and the proud, difficult inner text" (*Traditional Chinese* 218). Owen's remarks above initially surprised many Chinese readers. What Chinese readers refused to accept is that this explanation of Du Fu's intention of competing with Li Bai is partially unbelievable because it does not conform to Chinese traditional ethics and philosophy. However, we could not say his explanation is entirely groundless, as shown in his detailed analysis in his book *Traditional Chinese*

Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World. Owen's reading comes from an entirely different context and enables an intercultural confrontation.

A similar example occurs in Owen's interpretation of "afterword to *Records on Metal and Stone*" by Li Ch'ing-chao's (1084-1155) published in *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature*. According to Chinese interpretation, this collection is pervaded by Li's nostalgia for her happy life with her husband in their early life and by her sufferings from the war in her late life. However, Owen found that Li held resentment against her husband for his indifference towards her and being more interested in ancient scripts and paintings. Thus Owen points out that "resentment flows just beneath the surface: she implicitly compares her husband's passion for collection to the bibliomania of Emperor Yuan of the Liang and Emperor Yang of the Sui, both exemplars of bad government its dire consequences, both representatives of destructive distortions of value" (*Remembrance* 98). This conclusion Owen assimilates one's husband to a bad emperor may somehow be unacceptable for Chinese readers, since this is contrary to the mainstream of Chinese traditional ethics. In both examples, Owen's "misreading" offered Chinese scholars the opportunity to rethink their understanding of these texts thus enabling a kind of organic interpretative process that moves beyond the formal aspects of the text and situates it in the borderland between authorial intention, reception, and interpretation, that is, beyond traditional new critical concerns. Owen's interpretation arises directly from his understanding and experiences of human general nature, which justifies Li's lament about her husband's indifference and Du Fu's concealed intention to compete, regardless of cultural specificities.

In order to explain how the above process of interpretation takes place, a more accurate definition of cross-cultural interpretation is necessary. As a branch of hermeneutics, cross-cultural interpretation is different from the traditional induction method of positivism (from concrete to abstract thought) and also from rationalist deduction (from abstract premises to specific ways of thinking). In the past, interpretation was regarded as an ontological approach, but in modern hermeneutics interpretation in itself is regarded as ontology because it is inherent to the value of life. Thus, cross-cultural interpretation is the "transfer from one culture to another, one language to another, one text to another and one signifier to another. It means that the original culture, language, text and signifier will be explained, supplemented or replaced by another culture, language, text and signifier" (Li 196). Obviously, this is an open process during which each reader comprehends the text based on his/her own former understanding, cultural values, and experiences, so that changes on meaning are inevitable and multiple understandings maple possible. The meaning of a text is not only determined solely by the author and the text itself, but also by its readers. The understanding of this situation allows Chinese scholars to consider Owen's "misreading."

In the introduction to his book *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of Mid-Ninth Century (827-860)*, Owen explains that "this book is essentially different from the kind of work that has been done by Chinese scholars. Although these differences will no doubt be attributed to a 'Western' viewpoint, part of my intension is to reconcile a division within Chinese scholarship itself, between the precise work on the lives and dates of poets and poems, on the one hand, and, on the other, the kinds of generalizations that are made about this very long period, which has, through a complex historical accident, been labeled as a single entity, namely, the 'Later Tang'" (11). In terms of textual research on historical archives and data, Owen is obviously incomparable with most Chinese scholars. On this point, he has admitted that his research on poetry of later Tang Dynasty benefits from works of Xuancong Fu (1933-), for example. But the significance of Owen's study lies in the new understanding of Chinese literature from the perspective of the other, a different point of view from those of Chinese scholars. So what's the specific content of Owen's cross-cultural interpretation? On this point, the summary provided by Xiaolu Wang and Dongdong Shi in "Explanation and Utterance Mode of Chinese Literature in Western Sinology" is enlightening. Wang and Shi argue that "Owen attaches equal attention to life experience and rational thinking" (56; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Li and Guo) and thus Owen's practice can be regarded as an example of cross-cultural interpretation. For example, in his studies "South Mountain" by Han Yu (768-824), Owen compares it with "Changgu" by Li He 790-816) and "An Account of Little Stone Ramparts Mountain" by Liu Zongyuan (773-819). Owen does not think these are three isolated monologues, but regards them as part of a network of interrelationships. He attempts to unveil the intertextuality and structural

architecture of natural description and its aesthetic qualities. Rivers and mountains, traditional *Yin & Yang* (阴/阳) symbols in *The Book of Changes* are used by Han Yu as metaphors. For Owen they are part of the explanation of Chinese natural landscape because "natural order has ever made former poets rely on clean explanation of natural landscape without a doubt as an indispensable component of rhetoric in ancient Chinese poetries" (*The End* 39). However, in the middle period of the Tang Dynasty, some authors became suspicious of natural order and landscape and derived "different modes and premises and a group of contrary standpoints that are contained and implied mutually" (Owen, *The End* 40). This assertion is what makes possible Owen's reading of the three poems mentioned above.

Han Yu's "South Mountain" confirms a positive answer to the question whether nature has order or not, illustrated at the ending of the poem.

大哉立天地	Mighty they stand between Heaven and Earth,
经纪肖营腠。	In orderly function like the body's ducts and veins
厥初孰开张。	Who was he who first laid out their origin?
曷勉谁劝侑。	Who, in labor and striving, urged it on?
创兹朴而巧。	Creating in this place the simple and artificed,
戮力忍劳疚。	With forces joined, he bore long-suffering toil.
得非施斧斤。	Could he have not applied hatchet and ax? —
无乃假诅咒。	He must have used spells and incantations.
鸿荒竟无传。	No tradition survives from the Age of Chaos,
功大莫酬侏。	Such a mighty deed none can repay.
尝闻于祠官。	I have heard from the priest in charge of sacrifice
芬苾降歆嗅。	That he descends to taste the offering's sweet scent.
斐然作歌诗。	Finely wrought, I made this poem,
惟用赞报酬。	By which I may join in requiting him.

(Trans. Owen, *The End* 38)

Regarding the ending of this poem, Zhen Xu (1898-1967) indicated that 赞 (zan) means assistance and 报酬 (bao you) means returning sacrifice to god. For Xu, 大哉 (da zhai) (mighty) describes the shape of the mountain while 厥初 (juechu) (in the origin) inquires into its origin, 尝闻 (chang wen (have heard from) describes its supernatural differences, and 斐然 (fei ran (wrought) defines the intention of the poem (350). This is a traditional Chinese method applied in poetry annotation. Instead, Owen pays attention to a fascinating passage: "beginning with the comparison of the mountains to a living body, and moving immediately the body's creator" (*The End* 38). Interestingly, in Chinese cosmology this connection between the order of things and the creator is "impersonal," but Owen adds a clarifying line to assert that the unity of vision provided in the poem is "cosmic and imperial, with all particulars, in their immense variety, finding their place in the orderly whole" (*The End* 40) and this would justify the allusion to the creator as embodiment of the emperor in the period under study.

In the second poem, He Li's "Changgu," Owen finds "nature seems to offer an overabundance of fascinating details, which absorb the poet's attention" (*The End* 40) and "the poet can never see the whole of this forest landscape; it engulfs him with mysterious and isolated presences" (*The End* 45), so the answer to the question of the order in nature in the poem is negative. Thus, while Han Yu's "South Mountain" belongs to the imperial territorial mode of confident sceneries, Li's "Changgu" is the landscape of remote counties, an orderless space of fragments lacking unity which convey depressing feelings. This opposition between regularization and fragmentation is centripetal and centrifugal, mutually exclusive and complementing and characteristic of the Tang Dynasty poetic circles: "we could say that the explicit assertion of totalizing order compensated for fascination with the particular, or we could say that the fascination with the particular was a reaction to an increasingly explicit discourse of totalization" each opposite side may occur in another side (Owen, *The End* 47). The texts form a mutually interdependent opposition that, in the intercultural explanation mode used by Owen, conveys both emotional experiences and rational cognition.

The ambivalence of responses which attempt to grasp explanation as middle ground between natural experiences and human mystical aspirations are captured in Owen's analysis and in his research on Zongyuan Liu's prose "An Account of Little Stone Ramparts Mountain":

自西山道口径北，逾黄茅岭而下，有二道。其一西出，寻之无所得。其一少北

而东，不过四十丈，土断而川分，有积石横当其垠。其上为睥睨樞梁之形，其旁出堡坞，有若门焉。窥之正黑。投以小石，洞然有水声。其响之激越，良久乃已。环之可上，望甚远。无土壤而生嘉树美润，益奇而坚。其疏数偃仰，类智者所施設也。噫！吾疑造物者之有无久矣，及是愈以为诚有。又怪其不为之中州，而列是夷狄，更千百年不得一售其伎，是固劳而无用。神者倘不宜如是，则其果无乎？或曰：以慰夫贤而辱于此者。或曰：其气之灵，不为伟人，而独为是物，故楚之南，少人而多石。是二者，予未信之。

From the point where West Mountain road comes out, I went straight north, crossing over Yellow Reed Ridge and coming down the other side. There I found two roads. One went off to the west; I followed it, but found nothing. The other went north a bit and then turned to the east, where, after no more than a hundred and twenty-five yards, the dry land stopped at the fork of a river. There a mass of rock lay stretched across the margin. Along the top were the shapes of battle-meants and timbers, while to the side were palisades and a keep, which had something like a gateway in it. When I peered inside, it was completely black. I tossed a stone in, and there was a splash of water in a cavernous space. The echoes continued to resound for a long time. By circling around I could climb to the summit, where I gazed far into the distance. There was no soil, yet fine trees and lovely way they were spread out in clumps and open spaces, together with the angles at which they were set, made it seem like they had been placed there by some intelligence. For a long time now I have wondered whether there was a creator or not. When I came to this spot, I became even more convinced of his existence. But then I thought it peculiar that he did not make this in the heartland, but instead set it out here in an uncivilized wilderness where, in the passage of centuries and millennia, he could not even more once advertise his skill. Thus all his hard labor was to no purpose. Given that a deity should not be like this, perhaps he does not exist after all. Someone said, "It is to provide solace for virtuous men who come to this place in disgrace." Someone else said, "Here the divine forces produce no outstanding men, but instead produce only these things, so that south of Chu there are few people and many rocks." I do not believe either claim. (Trans. Owen, *The End* 48-49)

The first half of Liu's article contains his analysis of the singular views of Little Stone Ramparts Mountain, while in the second half, he suggests that a secluded and distant land offers an opportunity for the display of creative talents. Between the lines, one can contemplate such opinions in reference to the poet himself as they apparently show a faint criticism of the maker's faculties while hiding a strong sense of ridicule for his faculties. Read alongside the previous works we discuss above, this work can also be associated with a more ambitious issue regarding the ecological relationship between humanity and nature as Owen recognizes. The view of the landscape seems to be "architectural" in style and therefore includes a certain intention, although the final result is turned into a kind of occasional miracle. For Owen this is owing to "its separation from the imperial topography" (*The End* 49). We can conclude that Owen's overall interpretation of these three works turns to the method of rational analysis. However, his interpretation is linked to his own emotional experiences and intuitive insights based on his perceptual understanding and moving beyond empirical induction and abstract interpretation.

We might ask why Liu was so keen in pointing out the orientation and path of the Little Stone Ramparts Mountain at the beginning of the narrative and also as to what his exact intention would have been to make prospective readers visit such a remote place. Without any autobiographical materials to support interpretation, it might well be in order to provide the narrative with a familiar feeling of unfamiliar borderlands "creating an intelligible topographic order in the wilderness" (Owen, *The End* 49). However, this is just one possible interpretation among many others and Owen's conclusion does not seem to come via empirically logical analysis of materials. Besides, Owen's guess as to the origin of the name "Little Stone Ramparts Mountain" would seem contrary to the principles of positivism and rationalism, as well as the rigor of scientific research. But as noted above, literary interpretation does not follow inductive or deductive approaches drawing instead from the direct clarity of the meaning of life.

Owen's discussion of the diverging paths westward with the word 无所得 (wusuo de) "found nothing" or literally "nothing was gotten" and the one to the north first and then east broken suddenly by the mountain rock provides a reading for the word 得 (de) ("get something"). Owen puts this word 得 also in relation to the act of writing and the naming power of words. Writing provides definitions and thus appropriates and fixes conceptual mental space mapping it on concrete locations or "places" on the blank page. Owen explains that if you "make space intelligible, you have to 'get something', *de*, and getting something requires that it have words or a name; that is the only way we can orient one place in relation to another and explain the route to follow" (*The End* 53). The tension between "get something" and "nothing was gotten" can also be read in terms of pursuit and loss and as confirmation of a confused landscape without order, thus offering perhaps an interpretation for Liu's

feelings during his exile in Yungchow (永州) located in the southwest of Hunan Province, a remote area. Liu's secret ridicule of the supreme monarch alternates with a vision of clear and humble insight which only survival situations can give. The first refers to the concrete, to history, nationality, and territory and the second to the general, to philosophy, universality, and the world. Interpretation moves here beyond cultural traditions and becomes of cross-cultural interpretation. This emotional understanding is possibly the strength of traditional Chinese poetics, often distinct from the rational analysis of western approaches. However, there should be no need to separate both. Thus Owen's pursuit of cross-cultural interpretation lies in the equal stress on emotional understanding and rational analysis.

When endorsing Owen's *Mi-lou: Poetry and the Labyrinth of Desire*, John Hollander posits that "through the analysis of a series of traditional themes, metaphors, and rhetorical stance, Stephen Owen proposed a set of cross-cultural (ancient/present), empty (East/West) and unique interpretation routine"(back cover of Owen, *Mi-lou*). Indeed, this summarizes Owen's interpretative position, a unity of aesthetics and culture, ideology and history, as well as sensual understanding and rational cognition. Further, in "Talking about the New Direction of American Sinology" Kangyi Sun points out that Sinology at U.S. universities has been generally classified as "area study," but that the discipline-based division for example at Yale University, where Sinology was done in various departments has unexpected benefits and represents a new direction of US-American Sinology. This distribution has widened the scope of Sinology and enabled its expansion into the field of the comparative literature in the 1980s. Such interrelation broke the Chinese/Western binary mode, so that contemporary Sinologists believe that the emphasis of the essential difference is prone to overgeneralization (Sun 35-36). Thus, when Owen is placed in the context of US-American Sinology, his studies represent these new trends and affirm the overall direction of scholarship in Sinology.

In conclusion, the cross-cultural interpretation of Chinese literature by Owen is of significance concerning two aspects: it provides the Chinese people with a different perspective and insights to understand their own literature and offers Western scholars an introduction to Chinese literature. Of particular interest is Owen's exploration of universal values and the worldliness of Chinese literature and his cross-cultural interpretations offer a path for Chinese literature and Chinese scholarship to move towards the rest of the world.

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cultural Perspectives: A Critique of Culture and Aesthetics at the Transitional Period) (2003), *Zhongxi Wenxue Bijiao* (Comparison of Chinese and Western Literature) (with Lianrui Cui, 2008) and *Kua Wenhua Meixue: Chaoyue Zhongxi Eryuanlun Moshi* (Cross-cultural Aesthetics: Beyond the Chinese and Western Mode of Dualism) (2011). E-mail: <liqingben1@sina.com>

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