Literary History: 
Towards a Global Perspective 

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Volume 1 

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In politics, economics, communications and culture, the world is more of an interconnected whole today than ever before. It is increasingly difficult to claim an understanding of one’s own culture without realising the need to understand other ways of thinking and other cultural traditions than one’s own. Inasmuch as literature serves as a repository of and a window on cultural histories, intercultural understanding in the literary field is now more indispensable than ever before.

Meaningful familiarity with other traditions requires a knowledge of historical developments and the verbal articulations that express and define those traditions; hence the importance of a study of literary history that takes historical specificities into account but does not stop at historical and cultural divides. True literary history now, in the twenty-first century, must aspire to a global perspective in spatial as well as temporal terms.

Major histories of world literature have in fact been written since the 1830s and are still being produced—though works of this kind in English have always been rare and seem to have ceased to appear after the Second World War. The intellectual defensibility of literary history writing, especially of broad overviews of literary history, has been intensely contested over the last few decades. Not least, and like all “master narratives” that aspire to global coverage, histories of world literature do indeed face serious theoretical and practical difficulties on many levels. This project faces up to these difficulties deliberately and with great caution.

The present series of four volumes, Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective, attempts to address some of the theoretical problems and, at the same time, present a body of literary–historical contributions that shed light on the underlying literary realities and illustrate the fruitfulness of a global literary–historical perspective. It does not aspire to be a history of world literature. It is, instead, organised as a discussion of three fundamental questions: the notion of literature, the problem of genres and encounters between literary cultures. These three issues are associated with the conception and realisation of such a history. In the process of investigating
them, this project highlights the diverse modes by which a number of cultures around the world relate their verbal productions to their cultural life and to the narratives of their self-defining practices as individuals and groups. Each question forms the topic of a separate part of the series.

Part One, *Notions of Literature Across Times and Cultures*, concerns the treatment of the notion of literature itself. It is emphasised that this concept is a product of the European eighteenth century and that it lacks exact or even really close counterparts in earlier times and in other cultures. This volume comprises a series of essays discussing notions of "literature," and analogues of the same, in Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit, Arabic, and East and West African literary cultures, or various aspects of such notions. The historical scope is often considerable—three thousand years, in the essays about China. An introductory essay, drawing in part on the contributions on specific cultures, is devoted to a discussion of the concept of literature itself, of its traditional use in world histories of literature and of ways of overcoming the seeming theoretical impasse which the concept represents.

Correspondingly, Part Two, *Literary Genres: An Intercultural Approach*, takes up the problem of genres. Like the first volume, Part Two deals, indirectly, with the large underlying issues of intercultural comparisons between literatures and of the distortions that Western biases, terms and intellectual habits may introduce into Western writing of world literary history, especially the history of the cultures of other, non-European traditions. This second volume, then, contains essays about systems of genres and about the understanding of genre in the Chinese, early Arabic, and Persian literary cultures, and also essays about specific genres: Byzantine hagiography, Indian, Japanese and Chinese drama in a comparative perspective, and the Japanese autobiographical genre *watakushishōsetsu*. As in Part One, the historical span is great. Using the Japanese *monogatari* genre as an example, the introductory essay contains some reflections on what aspects may prove especially relevant for intercultural comparisons between types of literature as these obtain in their localised contexts and as they intermingle across frontiers of such sites of production. The concept of genre itself, or principles of organising kinds of verbal production in diverse cultures, is analysed in a concluding essay, starting out from genre notions in the European context. Inasmuch as such principles are instrumental in defining how verbal productions are deemed to be "literary," this essay also suggests how questions of genre can be productively approached in a world history of literature.

Part Three, *Literary Interactions in the Modern World*, is considerably larger than the preceding two and has been divided into two volumes. It fo-
cuses on encounters between literary cultures—and specifically on faultlines between literature and modernity—in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Very broadly conceived, the theme encompasses the negotiation of Western literary cultures with other literary traditions over the last two centuries and also, in part, the influence on Western literary thought and practices exerted by these cultures. Underlying this part of the series, too, is a problem of great significance for the writing of literary history: the understanding and representation of confrontations and exchanges between literary traditions. This question of transculturation and how it relates to the writing of literary history is treated in an introduction to the first of these two volumes (3), whereas the conclusion to the last one (4) deals in a more general manner with the issue of studying literature on a global scale. The treatment of this question, naturally, makes use of the materials and insights presented in the essays on literary-historical phenomena dealt with in the two volumes. These latter contributions cover a wide spectrum with regard to geography as well as to genres. There are essays about Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Arabic, Turkish, African and Spanish American literatures, about the novel, drama and poetry, and about many aspects of the appropriation and rejection of foreign literary influences and of their interplay with indigenous traditions and conditions of literary production.

The whole series of volumes was produced within the framework of a Swedish research project carried out between 1996 and 2004, "Litteraturen i världsperspektiv" ("Literature and Literary History in Global Contexts"), which was sponsored by the Swedish Research Council. Because of this, all the participants—who come from various academic disciplines: Arabic/Semitic languages, Byzantine studies, Comparative literature, Comparative religion, Indology, Iranian studies, Japanese studies, Sinology, Spanish, Theatre studies—work or used to work at Swedish universities. The participants met a couple of times a year, in small groups or in plenary sessions, to consider drafts of the articles or other problems relevant to their work or to listen to invited lecturers. The drafts of the volumes were discussed with international advisers in a series of special seminars in 2002.

The four volumes do not aim at comprehensiveness in time or space, nor do they pretend to achieve a fair or proportional coverage of all literatures. There is, for example, little about European literature or literature from the Americas, since Western literature was largely left to figure as an implicit point of reference; nor is there very much about oral literature. Both of these absences are lamentable, not least since it is precisely the implicit nature of the Western perspective that deserves to be interrogated, but this should not detract from the main ambition: to enrich the understanding of
the important issues associated with the forging of a more current and more truly intercultural perspective on the literary history of the world, and to do this through a combination of theoretical reflection and historical scholarship.

The literary-historical essays are not constrained to serve as examples of the ideas put forward in introductions and conclusions; nor are the introductory and concluding essays designed to sum up the main findings of the literary-historical contributions. All of these elements are structured in a less straightforward, more dialectical relationship to each other. The literary-historical essays are meant to be influenced by the theoretical perspectives, while the introductions and conclusions are informed by the literary-historical insights. Together, they should make the questions under consideration both more concrete and more transparent.

The three parts and four volumes that comprise the series may be read separately, but the project is designed to constitute a larger coherent whole than the sum of its parts.
The research behind this project was funded by the Swedish Research Council. We are deeply grateful to the Council for its generous and abiding support.

Early drafts of the volumes—then differently organised—were presented to external assessors in two-day meetings in the autumn of 2002. We benefited greatly from these discussions and wish to thank our assessors warmly: Elleke Boehmer, Eugene Eoyang, Djelal Kadir, Graham Pechey and Peter Widdowson. Thanks also to Michael Knight, Pat Shrimpton, Michael Srigley and Deborah Turrell, who scrutinised our English.

Introduction: Concepts of Literature and Transcultural Literary History

Historical and Transcultural Literary Studies

The study of literature does not, in principle, exclude any time or any culture. Nor are there any a priori restrictions that would render impossible research and expositions with a large historical and cultural span—or even world histories of literature.

The idea of a world history of literature may sound profoundly problematic. Many would question the ideological and epistemological soundness of such a project, and these kinds of doubts may also affect many types of less ambitious undertakings within transcultural literary history. (By transcultural literary studies I mean, here, literary studies which transcend the borders of a single culture in their choice of topic.) Some objections in this vein will be considered later. In my view, however, it is also easy to find arguments to support the need for a global perspective in literary studies.

The word "global," with its affinity to "globalization," is in itself likely to arouse complex and conflicting associations. It should be uncontroversial to say, though, that a large number of interrelated developments have successively tied the world more tightly together. The constantly intensified internationalization of economic and political activities, transportation, electronic communications, personal encounters, and media coverage are some of the more prominent expressions of this pattern. Our ecological fragility has also increased, and with it our ecological interdependence. As a consequence of all these changes, the need has never been greater for people with different cultural backgrounds to interact nor, naturally, the need to be able to understand and to take seriously cultures other than one's own.

For some time now, colonial/postcolonial studies have been addressing globalization and its effects in the literary field over the last few centuries,
emphasizing not least the aspect of power involved in cultural encounters
and how literature may be used both to disseminate and to undermine he-
gemonic ideologies. Yet there must obviously also be room for many other
kinds of transcultural studies of literature in a broad temporal and geo-
graphical perspective. It would arguably be a good thing if literary studies
could advance a clearer view of the literary cultures1 of the world and
make them, and their mutual relationships, more comprehensible to stu-
dents of literature and to a wider audience. Establishing and spreading
deeper knowledge and understanding of other cultures appears both impor-
tant and urgent.2

Transcultural literary competence is also of value for purely scholarly
and critical purposes. Much as our knowledge of the map of the world
gives us a perspective on our location in space, some knowledge of the
world history of literature will undoubtedly help students of literature to
orientate themselves regardless of their specialities. Even in studies of
one’s own national literature, lack of knowledge of the rest of literary his-
tory is likely to seriously distort one’s outlook. I will attempt to illustrate
later in this essay how our understanding of the very concept of literature
suffers from not being informed by a culturally and temporally broader
perspective than it is at present.

Thus far I have been speaking as if a world history of literature were an
imaginary, utopian project, but such histories already exist. In fact the gen-
re has a relatively long tradition. The concept of literature as we know it
came into existence, roughly speaking, during the course of the eighteenth
century. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries already saw the

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1 My use of the expression “literary cultures” (and, mutatis mutandis, of the word “cul-
tures”) should of course not be understood as implying that western literary culture, Chi-
nese literary culture, etc. are homogeneous and unchanging entities. The generalizing
talk of literary cultures is to be taken as a convenient shorthand. Cf. the use of the phrase
in such contemporary works as Sheldon Pollock (ed.), Literary Cultures in History: Re-
constructions from South Asia (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003); Mario J.
Valdés and Djelal Kadir (eds.), Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative His-
tory, 3 vols. (Oxford 2004); and Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (eds.), History
of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th
and 20th Centuries, 1 vol. to date (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publ.
Co., 2004—).

2 This is often underlined in present-day comparative literature—in different contexts and
with varying emphases. See, e.g., Masao Miyoshi, “Turn to the Planet: Literature, Diver-
sity, and Totality,” Comparative Literature 53 (2001), esp., p. 296; Gayatri Chakravorty
Spivak, Death of a Discipline, esp. chap. 3 (New York: Columbia UP, 2003).
beginnings of the writing of literary history—the history of national European literatures, the history of European literature as a whole and, at least from the 1830s onwards, the world history of literature. A considerable number of such world histories were produced as early as in the nineteenth century, especially in Germany but also elsewhere, and the genre has continued to exist on the European continent.

The most extensive modern world history of literature is the 24-volume German Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft (New Handbook of Literary Studies, 1972–2002). The Soviet Russian Istorija vsemirnoj literatury v devjati tomach (History of World Literature in Nine Volumes, 1983–94) was considerably more ambitious from a systematic point of view but was never properly completed: the work was published in only eight volumes, despite its name, for after the fall of the Soviet Union the collective of writers felt incapable of dealing adequately with the twentieth century section of the history. Another substantial modern specimen of the genre is the seven-volume Scandinavian, mainly Danish, Verdens litteraturhistorie.

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3 I am thinking of such works as Thomas Warton’s three-volume history of English literature (1774–81), Friedrich Schlegel’s two-volume history of European literature Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur (History of Old and New Literature, 1815—; originally a series of lectures held in Vienna in 1812), and the Handbuch einer allgemeinen Geschichte der Poesie (Handbook of a General History of Poetry), 3 vols. (Halle: Eduard Anton, 1832–33) by the young German philosophy professor Karl Rosenkranz. As far as I can tell, Rosenkranz’s work is the first world history of literature in the modern sense. (The genre of historia litteraria still existed at the time, i.e., presentations of all writings within the arts, sciences and polite letters. It was then often referred to in German as “allgemeine Literaturgeschichte”—general history of literature—and Rosenkranz no doubt called his work a history of “poetry” not least in order to distinguish it from historia litteraria. Prose is included in Rosenkranz’s concept of poetry.)


6 Cf. note 4 above. See Peter Ulf Möller “Writing the History of World Literature in the USSR,” Culture and History 5 (1989), for a presentation of the Istorija vsemirnoj literatury in English. The reasons for the untimely discontinuation of the work are explained in a notice from the editorial management in vol. 8 (1994), pp. 5–6.
raturhistorie (The Literary History of the World, 1985–1993). No comparable contemporary surveys seem to have been written in English. I am not aware of a single Anglophone world history of literature whose first edition appeared after the Second World War.

Works such as the ones mentioned above are often produced by excellent specialists and are normally extremely valuable as sources of information. Typically, however, they are problematic on at least four counts. First, the apportionment of space among the literary cultures does not seem fair. Western literature (in the sense of literature written in European languages) tends to occupy around 80 % of the total space, while other literatures share the remaining 20 % (a little space may also have been set aside for transcultural overviews and the like). Second, works of this type treat of a number of different literary civilizations: Chinese, Indian, Arabic, African, Western, et cetera, but on the whole each such culture is portrayed as a world of its own. Their interconnections are not very well analysed. Third, the accounts of different cultures operate, to a considerable extent, each with its own conceptual apparatus and angle of approach. One does not find a consistent set of points of view applied throughout the work—to take a simple example, where textual genres are concerned no consistent terminology is employed. Fourth, despite the fact that the concept of literature is pivotal to the works, the idea is by and large left unexplained. In reality, the concept is given different extensions in the works depending on the time and culture being discussed.

These four peculiarities conspire to place the reader in quite a complex situation. Imagine an atlas of the world composed on analogous principles. The atlas would not contain any key map of the world, only a series of individual maps, loosely related to one another, representing particular regions. Most of the pages in the atlas would depict Europe and America, and those pages would employ a far less reduced scale than the rest—while information about scales, and explicit discussion of the distribution of

7 Hans Hertel (ed.), Verdens litteraturhistorie appeared simultaneously in Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian versions. In this essay I base myself on the Danish ed. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal).

8 According to my categorization, 1 % of Rosenkranz's work (1,051 pp.; cf. note 3 above) deals with transcultural matters, 85 % with western material and 14 % with non-western. The corresponding figures for Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft (10,841 pp.) are 0–85–15 respectively, for Istorija vsemirnoj literatury v devjati tomach (5,141 pp.) 3–67–30, and for Verdens litteraturhistorie (2,773 pp.) 4–87–9 respectively. My inspections of other works in the genre, not mentioned here, have mostly disclosed similar proportions. Note, however, Letourneau's somewhat eccentric book (see note 52 below).
space, would be scant or non-existent. Moreover, the implicit criteria for inclusion in the cartographic representations would vary from page to page (rivers, say, would be indicated on some pages but not on others). Finally, both the set of map signs and the meanings of the signs would fluctuate, and keys to the signs would be lacking throughout.

For reasons that will become evident later, I regard it as in principle impossible to construct "the" authoritative description of the literary history of the world. I am convinced, however, that larger or smaller sections of this vast whole can be usefully described and interpreted—although the descriptions and interpretations will naturally vary depending on the underlying purpose.9

If one wishes to engage in transcultural literary studies, one has every reason to reflect on world histories of literature and on the problems associated with them. Transcultural literary investigations must of necessity negotiate many of the problems that surface with special, pedagogically rewarding acuteness in the transcultural historical studies that are widest in scope: world histories of literature.

The series Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective is intended to shed light on some major theoretical problems in historical transcultural literary research and to help improve the foundations on which such studies are based. The authors' ambition is to combine empirical awareness of the internal multiplicity and historical variability of literary cultures and of their multifarious similarities and differences with theoretical reflection on the complexities involved in literary studies that cross national, cultural,

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9 The metaphor of literary-history writing as a kind of map-making is often used pejoratively. Thus according to Linda Hutcheon, traditional literary history has been seen as "the totalizing verbal counterpart to the geographic world vision of empire visible on maps." "Rethinking the National Model," in Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés (eds.), Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2002), p. 5. Spivak, for her part, speaks ironically of "the scopic ambitions of mapping the world's literatures and bringing it under Euro-US rational control." Spivak, Death of a Discipline, p. 30.

Certainly a map may distort or function as an instrument of power. I see nothing wrong in principle however with the idea of maps of the world or with the idea of large-scale literary-historical overviews. As I just suggested, one of the features of existing world histories of literature that seems questionable to me, is the western bias which even their apportionment of space probably represents. Yet the presence of such Eurocentrism, no matter how entrenched, is of course a contingent state of affairs, not a necessary feature of world histories of literature. For further discussion of relevant points, see the sections "Conceptual relativity" and "Employing Concepts of Literature in Transcultural Literary History" below.
and temporal boundaries. In this project, Swedish specialists in Sinology, Japanology, Sanskrit, Arabic, et cetera cooperated with Swedish and Scandinavian scholars from comparative literature and from certain other disciplines. The four volumes centre on problems of intercultural comparison (related to the concept of literature in volume one and to that of genre in volume two) and of intercultural interplay (the studies of encounters between literary cultures during the last two centuries in volumes three and four). Ideally, theory and empirical knowledge should support each other in all the essays.

This opening volume is devoted to the concept of literature and to the question of how it can profitably be understood and employed in historical transcultural literary research. The theoretical discussion, mainly contained in the present essay, will not result in a definition of the concept, but I will recommend a general way of viewing the problem and consider possible strategies for handling it.

The central part of the essay—the next four sections—is concerned with the concept of literature and its understanding and use. In the final section the other seven contributions to the volume will be briefly presented. These are studies in Japanese, Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, and African literatures which illustrate how the concept of literature—or, rather, its more or less close counterparts—is conceived of in these cultures. Considered together, the eight essays should help the reader form a more comprehensive, practical, and adequate idea about the concept of literature, its cultural specificity or ubiquity, and its possible use in transcultural literary studies.

Concepts of Literature

Many cultures have operated with a division of texts into literary and non-literary—or at least into categories that students of literature have become accustomed to regarding as corresponding to such a distinction. It is thus customary to point to synonyms or near-synonyms for “literature” in other times and cultures—words like “wen” (Chinese), “kāvya” (Sanskrit), “adab” (Arabic), “poiēsis/poēsis” (Greek/Latin), and so on. One should however also be aware of the quite substantial differences between such concepts and our present-day western notion of literature.

Traditional oral cultures, and early literate cultures such as the Ancient Egyptian and the Sumerian/Babylonian/Assyrian, often have a more or less
developed vocabulary for designating genres, but they cannot, as far as I understand, be said to possess any concepts suggestive of the notion of literature. Ideas of that kind were not formed until later, in literary cultures such as the classical Chinese, Sanskrit, Greek/Roman, and Arabic ones.

Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft have described the emergence and meaning of literature-like concepts in such cultures by saying that when "there is a dramatic increase in the number of writings, with a corresponding differentiation in their content and character, the texts are likely to be subdivided into the categories of 'high' literature, professional literature, and popular literature. 'Literature' (or high literature) is then the term for texts which are felt to be of general educational value and which are, accordingly, regarded as part of the necessary intellectual baggage of every cultured person." This is, by and large, the division in the world of texts that underlies concepts like wen, kāvya, adab, poēsis: the distinction between culturally important utterance, worth preserving, studying, and handing on, and utterance of a practical, popular, or downright trivial character ("professional," "popular," or "trivial" literature).

The concepts referred to are not exact counterparts—for example, kāvya and poēsis carry with them a strong suggestion of verse—and their respective contents are often imprecise and always historically mutable. It appears evident, nevertheless, that they differ from the modern concept of literature in important ways. Most conspicuously, they often include types of text that are not in the denotation of the modern concept, texts that we might classify as history, philosophy, geography, law, administrative documents, magic, et cetera. Conversely, fictional prose, close to the centre of the current idea of literature, hardly falls within their scope. This will become obvious in the essays in this volume which comment on the indigenous Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Arabic conceptualizations.

If we wish to call these older or non-western notions "concepts of literature," we should remind ourselves that they are—to put it very simply—concepts of "literature" in the sense of 'utterance answering to high stan-

12 Ibid.
dards of cultural significance and style,’ not in the sense of ‘imaginative literature.’ The latter concept, with its associations with aesthetic autonomy, arose in Western Europe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, replacing “the traditional concept of literature that demanded the union of utility with pleasure in works of educational value.”¹³ (I will make no real attempt to explain why.¹⁴) The Latin loan-word “literature” simultaneously developed into the term that was used to express the new concept in European languages (while transforming its earlier meaning(s) considerably).¹⁵

What, then, does “literature” mean today? The proposed definitions vary. The basic explanation of the word “literature” in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is often quoted as a point of reference: “Literary productions as a whole; the body of writings produced in a particular country or period, or in the world in general. Now also in a more restricted sense, applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect.”¹⁶ Yet the definition does not, of course, cover all the semantic and pragmatic complexities connected with the concept of literature.

The OED definition itself refers to two quite different ways of understanding the word: one in which it appears to be more or less synonymous with “everything written” and one designated the “restricted sense.” Many additional inner tensions in the concept are left unmentioned by the OED. For example, the recurring talk of “writings” and “writing” in the defini-

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¹³ Ibid., p. 10.
¹⁴ Some simple observations are made in the section “Literature Across Times and Cultures” below.

For an ambitious analysis of the underlying social, intellectual, and cultural transitions, see Siegfried J. Schmidt, Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989). The broader cultural and historical picture is painted, with an impressive diachronic span, in Larry Shiner, The Invention of Art: A Cultural History (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001). Shiner sees the new view of literature (and of art generally) as emerging successively between ca. 1630 and ca. 1815.


tion serves to exclude oral literature, which it would nowadays be quite
normal to classify as literature (despite the word’s etymological connec-
tions with letters of the alphabet, literacy, and writing). Nor does the
OED mention the important fact that the genres of poetry, drama, and fic-
tional prose constitute a kind of core area according to our present intu-
tions about literature—so much so that there is an even more restricted, but
quite prominent, sense of the word in which “literature” is synonymous
with “imaginative literature.”

Some more subtle and more general circumstances also add diversity to
the use and meaning of the concept. What I have been speaking of thus far
is the unspecific, everyday idea of literature, which is used to effect certain
rough divisions within the world of texts, often rather ad hoc, and which is
characterized by a vagueness and versatility suited to that task. This is
however not the concept’s only role. The notion is used in library classifi-
cation, for instance, and for delimiting the kind of writing that makes one
eligible for the Nobel Prize in literature, and of course also, in a large
number of more or less specialized ways, within the academic field of liter-
ary studies. Closer inspection would reveal that the library classification
concept is not in fact the same as the Nobel Prize one, and that neither is
adopted within literary studies.

Another aspect of the concept’s multiplicity is the fact that its actual use
and meaning vary both among individuals and over time. When the every-
day concept of literature first emerged, for example, it also covered histor-
ical and philosophical writings and oratory. Its scope was however gradu-

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ally narrowed down during the course of the nineteenth century and has then, perhaps, tended to broaden again from the mid-twentieth century onwards. I am also convinced that different groups of people have rather diverging ideas about what is and is not comprised in literature in the modern western sense. As regards the everyday concepts of literature entertained by the general public, these are probably relatively diffuse and incoherent.

To add one final brushstroke to the picture: the concept of literature tends to change in content and meaning depending on whether it is applied to modern times or to older literary cultures. "Literature" carries a partly different and much wider meaning when used about literary cultures that do not conform to the modern western pattern, a fact to which I will revert later. It would have been a pleasure to be able to adduce a good historical explanation of this circumstance, but I know of no relevant studies and do not wish to speculate.


21 This is certainly the impression that one gains from the only ambitious empirical investigation of the matter that I know of: a study from more than 20 years ago concerning West Germany. See Dagmar Hintzenberg, Siegfried J. Schmidt, and Reinhard Zobel, *Zum Literaturbegriff in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Braunschweig and Wiesbaden: Friedr. Vieweg und Sohn, 1980), esp. pp. 71-72, 89-90.

22 Consider, e.g., Miriam Lichtheim's words in the preface to her much used anthology *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*, 3 vols. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: Univ. of California Press, 1975-80), vol. 1 (1975), pp. v–vi: "In dealing with ancient literatures it is both customary and appropriate to define literature broadly, so as to include more than belles-lettres.... Egyptian literature, then, means all compositions other than the merely practical (such as lists, contracts, lawsuits, and letters)." Cf., e.g., Rainer Rosenberg, "Literaturgeschichtsschreibung," in Harald Fricke et al. (eds.), *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft: Neubearbeitung des Reallexikons der deutschen Literaturgeschichte*, 3 vols. (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), vol. 2, p. 458.

23 See the section "Employing Concepts of Literature in Transcultural Literary History" below.
Presentational Discourse and the Modern Western Concept of Literature

As the observations in the last section should have made obvious, the content of the modern western concept of literature is variable and often vague. If one wishes to use the concept in a structuring function in a research project or an exposition, it would normally be wise to give it a suitable more definite and precise sense, something which must arguably involve a more or less pronounced element of stipulation. The productive thing to do would be to give the concept such a content that the literature/not-literature distinction becomes a relatively precise distinction, and one which it is also important to make in the investigation at hand. It will then depend on the topic and on the researcher's frame of interests which definition of "literature" would be the best under the circumstances.

What is needed in my present essay however is not the designing, partly through stipulation, of a more precise concept of literature suitable for use in a specific research context. It is rather a somewhat closer description of the modern western concept of literature, a description which, by serving as a point of reference, may help the reader see more clearly the similarities and differences between the modern western concept and its real or presumed counterparts in earlier times or in other cultures. In this section, I will therefore give an approximate description of the normal content of the concept, such as I perceive it. It should be remembered that the term "literature" in this section should always be understood as a synonym of "literature in the modern western sense."

Let us think of literature against the background of linguistic intercourse in general. Language is first and foremost a vehicle of communication. Almost without exception, linguistic utterances possess a representational

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24 Cf., once again, the section "Employing Concepts of Literature in Transcultural Literary History" below. In my article "The Concept of Literature: A Description and an Evaluation," in Stein Haugom Olsen and Anders Pettersson (eds.), *From Text to Literature: New Analytic and Pragmatic Approaches* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), I have explained in much more detail how I see the problems surrounding definitions of "literature" and also considered other ways of viewing the matter.

25 The notion described in the following could be said to be the one called "the restricted sense" in the *OED* definition. The even narrower sense which I referred to as "imaginative literature"—poetry, fiction, drama—is very nearly equivalent to what I dub, below, "presentational discourse."
content; a description of something in the world is formulated and made available to an addressee.26

The representational content may be intended to be taken as depicting actual, existing states of affairs, as when you take a guest for a walk around your campus and point out the Humanities building to her or him, saying "That is the Humanities building." Such utterances are assertions, statements of facts, produced in order to be believed and to provide the addressee with information. Whole texts are seldom simply webs of assertions (a text of any considerable length is normally somewhat heterogeneous from a pragmatic point of view), but texts of certain kinds—a university textbook, say, or a newspaper notice—may nevertheless be dominated by the manifest ambition to convey correct representations of the world. Let us characterize texts answering to that description, and also simple assertions, as pieces of informational discourse.

Conversely, the representational content of an utterance or a text may sometimes be intended to outline states of affairs that do not yet exist but are to be brought about by the activity of the addressee. This is the case with explicit or implicit exhortations. A sign reading "No smoking in this area," for example, describes a situation—nobody is smoking in the area concerned—which the addressees (anyone in the vicinity, in this case) are expected to help to realize. Again, one seldom finds a whole text of any length made up solely of exhortations, but there are kinds of compositions, such as summonses, manuals, and cookery books, that are dominated by the ostensible ambition to regulate the addressee's behaviour and thus make the states of affairs described come true. Let us characterize such texts, and also simple exhortations, as pieces of directive discourse.

The representational content of an utterance or a text may also be intended to be taken in other manners, which gives rise to a whole spectrum of pragmatic varieties of speech acts and discourses. Of considerable interest in our context is the case where the representational content is meant to be understood as depicting an entirely invented situation or series of situa-

tions. Think, for example, of the chains of events recounted (in narrative form) in a work of prose fiction like Kenzaburo Oe's *A Personal Matter* (*Kojinteki-na taiken*, 1964) or (in dramatic form) in a play like Wole Soyinka's *Camwood on the Leaves* (1960).

The human importance of fiction is less easy to explain than that of informational or directive texts and utterances. (Western reflection on literature usually portrays it as pleasing—aesthetically pleasing, or just enjoyable—or cognitively illuminating, or both at the same time.) For the sake of my argument it suffices to point out that the representational content plays a different role in a piece of fiction than it does in informational or directive discourse. The fictional representational content is not directly associated with a matching reality which it, purportedly, truthfully reflects (informational discourse) or pictures as desirable to bring into existence (directive discourse). Nicholas Wolterstorff once described the representational content of fictional discourse—quite aptly in my view—as being merely presented by its author:

The fictive stance consists of *presenting*, of offering for consideration, certain states of affairs—for us to reflect on, to ponder over, to conduct strandwise extrapolation on. And he [the fictioneer] does this for our edification, for our delight, for our illumination, for our cathartic cleansing, and more besides. It's as if every work of fiction were prefaced with the words "I hereby present that ..." or "I hereby invite you to consider that ...".

Let us characterize texts and utterances dominated by the ostensible ambition to "present," in Wolterstorff's sense, a representational content to an addressee as pieces of *presentational* discourse.

Wolstertorff's view has been criticized for not taking into account that contents are also presented in informational and directive discourse. But this is simply not true—not if one is speaking of "presentation" in its technical, Wolterstorffian sense. A representational content is certainly *introduced* in informational, directive, and presentational discourse. But in presentational discourse, unlike the other forms, the content is principally

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28 The best known of the loci classici is Quintus Horatius Flaccus, *De arte poetica*, I. 333–34 (and 343–44). Horace is then echoed throughout the history of western thinking about literature. Consider, e.g., Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, pp. 29–30 and the quotation from Wolterstorff below.
meant to be valuable in itself as a source of experience, not mainly intended to be valuable from the informational or directive point of view. In saying that a fictional picture of a young teacher of English in Tokyo is presented in Oe’s A Personal Matter one does not merely state that it is introduced. One rather contends that the reader is expected to use the representation of the teacher (and of the rest of the fictional world, including the formal elements of the representation) in the first place to prompt associations (related to feelings). At the same time, one also implies that the addressee is not primarily expected to relate the content directly to empirical realities (as something asserted to be the case or as something to be brought about).

Wolterstorff’s description of presenting forms part of an analysis of what he calls “the fictive stance.” It is important to stress, however, that presentational discourse is not necessarily fictional. Consider, e.g., Wisława Szymborska’s poem “The Birds Return” (“Przylot”) from the collection A Million Laughs, A Bright Hope (Sto pociech, 1967):

This spring the birds have again come back too early.
Rejoice, O reason, instinct can also err.
It dozes off, it overlooks—and down they fall into the snow,
and perish senselessly, perish with scarce justice to
the structure of their throats and arch-claws,
the solid cartilage and conscientious webbing,
the estuary of the heart, the labyrinth of innards,
the aisle of ribs and vertebrae in splendid enfilade,
the feathers worthy of a pavilion in a museum of all the crafts,
and the beak of monkish patience.

This is no dirge, it’s only outrage
that an angel of real albumen,
a flirty fidget with glands from the Song of Songs,

30 The word “prompt” is a deliberate allusion to chap. 1, sec. 2 of Kendall Walton, Mimesis as Make-Believe. "Prompters," says Walton, "induce us to imagine what otherwise we might not have been imaginative enough to think of.... Imagining is a way of toying with, exploring, trying out new and sometimes farfetched ideas. Hence the value of luring our imaginations into unfamiliar territory." Kendall L. Walton, Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1990), p. 22.
Szymborska describes and evaluates a situation and its consequences. What we are told, literally speaking, is that the birds have come back too early, and that a dead bird has been found in the snow near a stone. This is not obviously fictional; it may well correspond to actual fact. (Much of what is said is said through metaphor and allusion, but being figurative and being fictional are two different things. And much is reflection, but reflection is not specifically connected with fictional discourse.) Yet it does not make sense to suppose that Szymborska comments on these incidents in order to inform the reader of them, so what we have before us cannot be a piece of informational discourse. In fact, the poem is clearly a piece of presentational discourse—the content is undoubtedly presented in the technical sense. This demonstrates that presentational discourse is not the same as fictional discourse: the poem is obviously presentational but not, or not obviously, fictional.

We can thus distinguish between at least three discursive modes: the informational, the directive, and the presentational. As the reader may have guessed, I wish to associate literature with presentational discourse. One cannot, however, simply identify presentational discourse with literature if one wishes to capture the usual content of the latter notion. Some presentational discourse (for example, simple jokes) is not literature. Cultural expectations of many kinds are linked to the concept of literature, and these are sometimes strong enough to prevent presentational compositions that do not fulfil them from being seen as literature. I be-


34 I do not wish to give the impression that the presentational mode is on a par with the informational and directive ones. I regard the two latter as being absolutely fundamental, while I see presentational discourse—together with promises, performatives, and many other kinds—as secondary pragmatic varieties.
lieve that at least the following traits ought to be included in a list of such expectations.  

_Literature is of central cultural importance._ Literature is expected to hold an important place among the spiritual values in our civilization. (This partly explains why presentational but culturally less valued types of texts such as popular literature and children’s literature have some difficulty in gaining acceptance as literature.)

_Literature is carefully and expertly formed._ As we have seen, “beauty of form” figures among the literature-making properties mentioned in the _OED_. As I understand it, expert craftsmanship is not in fact normally regarded as being either a necessary or a sufficient condition for belonging to literature, but it is still a quality that one expects literature—especially paradigmatic, prototypical imaginative literature—to possess.

_Literature is conducive to aesthetic experience._ Literature is expected to give rise to experiences whose main value consists in some sort of inner enrichment that is difficult to describe.

It is also worth remembering that most literature (the exception being oral literature and staged drama) today exists in the form of printed matter, read individually and silently. Admittedly, that feature has no relevance for the _definition_ of literature, but it is important to point out since it nevertheless lends literature an individualistic character. It is natural to think of the notion’s associations with intangible refinement, individualism, expert craftsmanship, and cultural importance as mutually reinforcing one another.

With some justification, then, literature in the modern western sense could be understood, approximately, as _presentational discourse produced with pretensions to being culturally important, and/or well-formed, and/or conducive to aesthetic experience_. It is worth remembering, however, that “literature” is used in a wider sense, sometimes approaching ‘everything written,’ when one is referring to older cultures. That circumstance, too, is an aspect of the modern western notion of literature.

To forestall misunderstanding, it is worth repeating that this is simply an attempt to describe how the concept’s content is perceived today. Such descriptions could be formulated differently. My ambition is to provide a reasonable, brief description which is also grounded in considerations of how language is used in what we call literature.

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35 By rights, I should of course furnish empirical evidence that these established expectations are in fact in force—something which cannot be done within the compass of this essay. I must rely on the reader’s cultural competence for verification.
Conceptual Relativity

I have not attempted to say what literature is, but only how it is ordinarily perceived. I have a reason for this. Many people, including myself, hold that terms, concepts, linguistic expressions, and suchlike are human artefacts. As John Searle puts it: "Systems of representation, such as vocabularies and conceptual schemes generally, are human creations, and to that extent arbitrary." If this is correct, there can be no question about what the content of a given concept is, over and above the question of what knowledgeable people currently take it to be. One can certainly always suggest, for such and such avowedly good reasons, that the concept should be given a more or less different content—that the word in question should be associated with partly different ideas—but that is a different matter.

Think of the concept of a friend. All competent speakers of English have some knowledge of what “friend” means. Webster defines a friend primarily as “one attached to another by affection or esteem,” and this presumably tallies with our ordinary linguistic intuitions. Could we all be mistaken in our semantic beliefs—not you or I individually, but all of us, taken together? Is it conceivable that competent speakers of English as a collective are wrong in their assumptions about the meaning of the word “friend”? My answer is no: the meaning of a word in a language at a given point in time simply is what competent speakers, understood as a collective, take it to be. This is true of all concepts, the concept of literature included. Hence the meaning of the word “literature,” the content of the concept of literature, is what competent people perceive it to be.

37 It may be objected that one should not identify meanings with concepts. I agree in principle, but regard meanings as being crucial parts of concepts, so that my remarks in the text still hold. Personally I would see the idea of what the word “friend” means as being included in our idea of what a friend is, in our concept of a friend, while the concept would also contain information of other kinds. Since there are many ways of conceiving of meaning, and many ways of conceiving of concepts, it is difficult to carry the discussion of the matter further here. For my own part, I subscribe to the view of concepts presented in Paul Thagard, Conceptual Revolutions (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), chap. 2, esp. pp. 24–30 and, more briefly, in Thagard’s Mind: Introduction to Cognitive Science (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, A Bradford Book, 1996), esp. pp. 60–62.
the objects which we classify as literary texts. Such questions, too, can be understood as questions about what literature is (or is like). They may be very significant and interesting, but they concern, naturally, very different subjects than the content of the concept of literature.

As I have already implied, we may also be in search of a better concept than the one presently at our disposal. We may want to refashion the concept, make it more apt and more useful. This presupposes that we have, implicitly or explicitly, some idea of a purpose for which the remodelled concept will be more suitable than the original one. Investigations along these lines may likewise be of great importance. In pursuing them, however, we do not, arguably, attempt to discover what the content of the concept of literature actually is. We are, instead, reconstructing the concept. (Think of car manufacturers improving a car model—their task is not to find out the truth about the model, for there is no model independent of their various designs, and consequently no such truth. What they attempt to do is to make a better car.)

These remarks should have removed much of the impression of stark relativism from the idea that literature is what it is perceived to be. Yet the standpoint is indeed relativistic to some extent. Some may wish to take an objectivist stance instead: they may think that concepts (or some concepts) do exist independently of human construction and human agreement so that the collective of qualified observers may in fact be mistaken in its perception of their content. Personally, however, I find it difficult to make sense of such a view. I particularly feel the need for an explanation of where, and how, these mind-independent concepts are thought to exist, and of how we are supposed to acquire and ascertain knowledge about them.

Their being a kind of human construct does not make our concepts somehow spurious. Human constructs (think of such things as chairs, boats, space shuttles) may be of great value (or complete failures, and everything in between). It is natural to ask about constructs, including concepts and other kinds of representations, whether they are good constructs or not. However that question does not make any real sense unless we also specify a purpose the construct is meant to fulfil, one in relation to which the construct may be judged productive or unsuccessful. (Whether the related purpose is worth pursuing is also a pertinent question.)

The observations about concepts are naturally also valid for the concept of literature. Many systems of text classification can be devised and have been devised. The category of literature forms part of most current systems, but systems without the concept have certainly existed, and such sys-
tems are not a priori inferior. It is an open question whether ‘literature’ actually is a useful concept. Perhaps it is practical for some purposes but not for others. Perhaps it needs to be constructed in different ways in different contexts, depending on the purpose at hand.

Some readers will probably feel that this is to carry relativism too far: it is an undeniable fact, they will reflect, that literature does exist. My answer is that there are senses in which this is true and senses in which it is not. We have created a concept of literature with the help of which we classify texts, and when we apply (some version of) that human-made concept to the world of texts, some texts will come out as being literary and some texts as being non-literary. Thus given our present system of text classification literature does indeed exist, and we can ask all kinds of questions about its characteristics. Yet if other systems of text classification were constructed and used, systems that did not include a category called “literature,” there would no longer be any literature.

Again, some readers may feel that this is not true. Once the concept of literature is invented, it becomes possible to create texts meant to meet the criteria of the concept. Many texts are literary in the rather fundamental sense that they are written as literature, intended to function as literature.

It is admittedly a historical fact about such texts that (some version of) the idea of literature influenced their creation. Yet if other systems of text classification were constructed and used, systems that did not include a category called “literature,” there would still no longer be any literature, except in the historical sense that people once reckoned with something they called “literature” and that we will have to understand this notion if we are to comprehend how they intended some of their writings to be taken—much as we will have to understand the concept of a witch if we are to make historical sense of early modern witch trials. It is consequently not the case, I would say, that literature exists in any absolute sense: that we cannot do without the concept of literature because it captures a structure in reality itself that simply has to be conceptualized, no matter what.  

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38 I foresee the objection that it would be quixotic to doubt the inevitability of the concept of literature, since the concept is so central to our understanding of an important cultural good. I would however find such an objection too narrow in its perspective. The concept is central to our present understanding of an important cultural good, but the textual domain in question may imaginably be better conceived in other terms. Such conceptual reorganizations occur all the time and are sometimes profound and dramatic—see Thagard, Conceptual Revolutions.
Searle refers to his contention that systems of representations are human creations, and thus to some extent arbitrary, as the thesis of “conceptual relativity.” What he wishes to underline is that one and the same reality can be described in terms of many different systems of representation, and that all these descriptions may be correct, given the respective systems. To take some simple examples (not used by Searle): the colours of a flower may be described in different natural languages and in terms of different systems for colour description. Dates and years may be given according to different calendars—which are, of course, different systems for the representation of time. Generally speaking, more than one optics can be used in the description of reality, and there is no absolutely privileged optics, since reality cannot prescribe how it is to be viewed and talked about. This, I take it, is the gist of the thesis of conceptual relativity.

The idea of conceptual relativity can perhaps help us to view some epistemological and ideological objections to literary history in a new light, for the relativity associated with literary history has often been comprehended as a feature of literary history specifically, not as the general condition of human knowledge that it undoubtedly is. Thus David Perkins was inclined to deny, in his ambitious and influential book from 1992, *Is Literary History Possible?*, that “any construction of a literary past can meet our present criteria of plausibility.” His reasons were, basically, of a conceptual or epistemological nature. Perkins argued, among other things, that “the objects to be classified are heterogeneous; in observing their similarities and differences we must be selective; in drawing the boundary lines we must impose a single point of view or a limited set of points of view. In the process of being formed, classifications cease adequately to represent the past.”

Apparently, according to Perkins, classifications cease to adequately represent the past as soon as there is selectivity and a point of view behind them. What Perkins does here is, in my view, to use the feature of conceptual relativity, encountered in all human activity, as an argument specifically against the plausibility of literary history. I would say that the argu-

40 My references to “reality” may have caused some raised eyebrows. I certainly believe in the existence of a mind-independent outer world, but this is not the place to defend that idea, especially since those who wish may take the word here in a relativistic vein and equate it with “presumed reality” without further consequences for my argument.
41 David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP). Quotations from, pp. 17, 111 respectively.
ment is not relevant. Perkins could just as well have said that literary history is implausible since it uses language.

It is also often assumed that literary history is by necessity driven by ideological forces. Linda Hutcheon has recently described it as a "fact that the writing of literary history inevitably serves political interests." 42

I have taken it for granted that all representations, and all other human constructs, are created in order to be useful in one way or another. In this fashion, constructs are bound up with human purposes—with cognitive purposes and, at least indirectly, with wishes and desires. Hence concepts are always intricately associated with networks of beliefs and purposes. As a consequence, all human representations and all human discourse will be coloured, to a larger or lesser extent, by the worldviews and agendas underlying them. This lends some justification to Hutcheon's contention that the writing of literary history inevitably serves political interests. Yet I believe that either the word "inevitably" or the word "political" ought to be replaced.

It would be easy to prove that literary history "sometimes" serves political interests, but the idea that it does so "inevitably" seems to me difficult to sustain. It is not clear to me why this would be logically or factually necessary. Likewise, it seems impossible to doubt that the writing of literary history serves human interests, and that such interests are always inevitably more or less specific and partial. Nevertheless, the word "political," with its suggestion of a tangible relationship to politics, does not appear felicitous to me. Put more generally: I would accept the idea that there is always an ideological component in our accounts of reality, 43 provided that the word "ideological" is understood in the sense of 'relating to a systematic body of ideas,' not in the sense of 'based on a political philosophy or a sociopolitical programme.' I would not however be prepared to regard literary history as being special in this respect: ideological components in this sense can be found in all discourse, most obviously of course in all discourse outside of the exact sciences.

42 Hutcheon, "Rethinking the National Model," p. 5.
43 "There does, in fact, appear to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality," says Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973), p. 21. In this book—also very influential within the theory of literary history—White points out with great effectiveness how the historian's activities are constructive through and through (see, e.g., p. 30) without questioning, because of that, the existence of a mind-independent outer world (see esp. p. 6, note 5).
Employing Concepts of Literature in Transcultural Literary History

The expression "literary history" may refer to literary-historical reality itself—the actual history of literature—or to the branch of literary research devoted to its study. A work of literary history is an account of a larger or smaller portion of literary history.

"History" normally implies the existence of real historical connections among the elements studied, but the nature of these links may arguably be allowed to vary. Some would no doubt say that we cannot speak of a world history of literature before the point in time when the literary cultures of the world came in genuine communication with each other, but such a requirement appears unnecessarily strict to me. The cultures are in contact now, and consequently the events forming part of them constitute historical processes that eventually came to interact.

Accounts of literary-historical complexes and processes may be valuable for various reasons. Evidently, a literary-historical work should have something interesting to say about literary history, but this leaves very many possibilities open. I cannot attempt to survey here the conceivable goals of literary-historical works.

When speaking of transcultural literary history, I will continue to use world histories of literature as an example, since it is so instructive. In the opening of my essay, I suggested that it is important for laypeople and specialists alike to acquire a clearer view of the literary cultures of the world and of their mutual relationships, and I will take that point for granted. How, then, can the concept of literature profitably be understood and used within a world history of literature?

In my opinion, that question has no single, positive answer. The concept of literature, as I have described it, has a relatively vague and somewhat incoherent content. That may not be a serious problem when the notion is used in everyday situations. In an academic context, however, something

44 Note that I am speaking of a world history of literature, not of a history of world literature. By tradition, "world literature" refers to a subset of literature, typically a canon of masterpieces of world significance. Today, some researchers suggest giving the concept a partly different content, see, e.g., Damrosch, What Is World Literature?, pp. 4, 15, 283 and Stefan Helgesson’s afterword to volume 4 in the present series.

more precise is often needed. If we employ the word “literature” in our academic work46 without giving it a relatively clear meaning, the statements in which we use it will themselves lack clarity of meaning. As I emphasized earlier, when the word “literature” does not in itself possess enough precision for the academic purpose at hand, we will simply have to add that precision ourselves by stipulation. We will have to refashion the concept of literature so that it can serve the purpose for which we need it.

In short, we should make sure that we have something interesting to say in our world history of literature, and that we employ the concept of literature in such a way that it becomes a useful tool for putting that central content across. It would be a mistake to ask in abstracto how the concept should be defined and used. Instead, we should make a point of defining the purpose of the history in a productive way and of designing the concept in a manner that makes it suitable for the purpose.

That is in fact not at all how the matter is usually approached. Normally, the concept of literature is taken at face value. A typical world history of literature is avowedly a global account of that which is literature in the general, everyday sense, which means that the concept of literature is in re-

46 Why, indeed, should we not abandon the concept of literature and make a fresh start? My reply is that we could probably get along quite well without the concept of literature, and that I am not against that in principle, but that it is important to remember that there are no completely fresh starts.

We cannot place ourselves outside history. We can certainly invent new concepts, denoted by newly coined terms, for discussing what is now called “literature.” There is nothing inherently wrong with such manoeuvres. When introducing and using these innovations, we will however, now and in the foreseeable future, be forced to explain, in one way or another, how our new concepts relate to the notion of literature traditionally used about the area. We will have to explain, e.g., how the new vistas that we open up supplant the old ones, and in what their superiority consists. For that reason alone we cannot, whatever we wish to do in this field, manage without an understanding of the concept of literature and of its complexities. Such understanding will also be necessary to keep us from the risk of inventing concepts that are superficially new but are by and large beset by the same problems as the notion of literature.

In fact in the present essay I am, in a sense, suggesting that we abandon the concept of literature—namely, that we abandon the idea of one concept of literature, the concept of literature suitable for all contexts and purposes. My proposal is that in academic literary studies contexts we replace it, whenever any considerable degree of precision is needed, with concepts of literature specially designed to suit the purpose at hand. In other words, I believe that “literature” will have to be defined whenever it is to carry structural weight in an academic book or article or lecture, and that the definition will have to be stipulative to some extent. This goes some way towards abandoning the concept, for the concepts of literature thus introduced could naturally (in view of the arbitrariness of the relation between concepts and their designations) have been presented under some other name than “literature.”
ality left vague and inconsistent. Most conspicuously, "literature" is traditionally used in a much wider sense when applied to older periods than when used about modern times.\footnote{This is a well-known feature of histories of literature. See, e.g., Rosenberg, "Literaturgeschichtsschreibung," p. 458. Contributors to world histories of literature are often aware of these inner tensions in the concept of literature, and they sometimes comment on them. For some such statements in the Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft, see Krecher, "Sumerische Literatur," pp. 103-104, Ernst Vogt, "Die griechische Literatur," in vol. 2 (1981), pp. 1-2, and Wolfhart Heinrichs, "Einführung," in vol. 5 (1990), p. 17.}

This is not a promising strategy. If one collects an aggregate of texts on inconsistent principles, there will probably be few interesting general perspectives on the corpus. Sensing that, one will tend to be less willing to attempt to formulate clear and specific purposes for one's work. All in all, I believe that insecurities rooted in the understanding of the concept of literature and its possible uses play a considerable, negative role in existing world histories of literature.

Many, of course, see these matters differently. Researchers tend to accept the modern western concept of literature unquestioningly, as if it were not an optics but something offering unmediated access to reality. Thus N. I. Konrad writes, in the *Istorija vsemirnoj literatury*:

> It is an obvious fact that the scope of literature is not the same at different times in history. Plato's *Symposium* is included in Ancient Greek literature; Livy's *History* and the *Historical Records* by Sima Qian form part of Ancient Latin and Ancient Chinese literature respectively. Ferrero's *Greatness and Decline of Rome* is however not counted as a work of Italian literature of the Modern Era, nor does Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* form part of imaginative literature—despite the undisputable brilliance of these two works precisely in literary respects.\footnote{N.I. Konrad, "Mesto pervogo toma v *Istorii vsemirnoj literatury*," in *Istorija vsemirnoj literatury*, vol. 1 (1983), p. 14. My translation.}

After a number of analogous observations, Konrad goes on to argue that the historical changes in literature's scope is one of the most important phenomena in literature's history.\footnote{Ibid., p. 15.} In doing so, he is taking the modern western concept of literature for granted, inconsistencies and all. It is true that Plato's *Symposium* is included in Ancient Greek literature by us, today, but it was not so included by the ancient Greeks themselves—for the simple reason that there was no concept of literature, nor any really close counterpart, in Ancient Greece (or Rome, or China). Konrad's perception of a historical change in literature's scope is, I would say, an illusion cre-
ated by our modern western concept of literature. We use much more liberal criteria for classifying older texts as literature, and consequently a much larger portion of the older corpus of texts will be included in the concept.50

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If we are not prepared to use the concept of literature without modifications in our transcultural literary-historical work,51 how should we proceed? As before, I will use the writing of world histories of literature as my main example.

One option would be to decide on one definite concept of literature on which the history should be based, and to write a world history of that which is literature in this specific sense. For instance, one could write the world history of literature in the "imaginative literature" sense, including in the history only imaginative literature and excluding history, oratory, philosophy, geography, magical writings, and so forth. This would satisfy the interest in knowing what existed in earlier cultures that coincides with literature in the sense used about present conditions. A history of world literature along these lines would of course look very unfamiliar, but that is not in itself an intellectual shortcoming. More worrying, perhaps, is that such a history might simply separate individual older works from the cultures to which they belong, and where they form natural parts of textual worlds very different from the modern western one, and thus be deeply unhistorical in important respects.

Conversely, one could write the world history of literature-in-the-wide-sense—of all verbal discourse, or of all verbal discourse with marked aesthetic ambitions (whatever one takes that to mean). True, this would perhaps be an insuperable task unless it were done in extremely broad outline and the history were focused not on individual works or authors, or even genres, but on something like verbal cultures and their successive

50 If one shares Konrad's intuitions, one can of course attempt to mount a convincing independent argument for the usefulness of a concept of literature supplied with different inclusion criteria depending on the time to which it is applied. I believe that such a project would be foredoomed but will not pursue the matter here.

51 Naturally, nothing prevents us from consciously writing new world histories of literature on the traditional pattern, building on the unmodified, modern everyday concept of literature. (The writing of such histories could, e.g., be motivated by demands or expectations from the reading public.) What I dispute is that such histories of literature are defensible on systematic, scholarly grounds.
changes. In fact, I know of one such history: the French anthropologist Charles Letourneau’s work from 1894, *L’Évolution littéraire dans les diverses races humaines* (The Evolution of Literature in the Different Human Races). In his very original work, Letourneau emphatically includes oral literature in his considerations, and he describes it as his aim simply to “mark the principal phases” through which literature has passed with a special focus on its emergence.\(^{52}\) (Here it is the Rest, not the West, that is being focused on: the West is given about 26% of the space, the Rest 67%, and 7% is set apart for general introductions and the like.)

Letourneau’s work is of course antiquated, and the way it employs the concept of race is bound to make a contemporary student of literature rather uncomfortable. Nevertheless I find it easy to sympathize with many of the intellectual impulses behind Letourneau’s book. I would be even more interested, however, in a world history of literary cultures where the worlds of texts associated with different civilizations and eras were described, against their societal background, together with their principal characteristics and functions, and the kinds of discourse tending towards imaginative literature were marked off and exemplified.

Such a work would not necessarily have to employ a concept of literature at all. It could simply point to the fact that the kinds of texts at the centre of attention are those often conceived of as being literary, and let that motivate its presentation as a work concerned with “literary” cultures. It might however be a good idea to introduce a concept of literature for the sake of comparison and orientation. In the account of the literary cultures, one could for example point out what is and is not literature according to a concept of literature which one introduces carefully (for example, a concept of literature in the sense of imaginative literature or in the sense of presentational discourse).

I would also be greatly interested in reading a world history of literature that concentrates on the formal and pragmatic possibilities of language typically employed in literary discourse in the modern sense, and on their emergence and use in various cultures throughout history—a history of the emergence and use of presentationality, for example. In such a history, again, no specific concept of literature would be needed. The real object of investigation would be a kind of language use, defined in terms of linguis-

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tic and philosophical pragmatics, and its special characteristics and use in various times and cultures.

* In current state-of-the-art literary-history writing it is common to emphasize strongly (and, of course, rightly) the complexity of literary-historical processes. One also often wishes to break up the presentation of literary history by means of a kind of mosaic disposition. Thus the new, complexly structured three-volume literary history of Latin America sponsored by the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History* (2004), is described by its main editor as being an "open history ... designed as multiple dialectic encounters whose tensional developments must be interpreted by the reader" and as one where "the historical materials ... are laid out in a grid, subject to the multiple viewpoints of 242 scholars and open to the interpretation of the reader."53 The related history about East-Central Europe, also supported by the ICLA, *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (2004--), is organized according to so-called "nodes." It will contain both articles about temporal nodes (1989, 1968/1956, and so on), about topographical nodes (for example, about the literary cultures of cities like Prague, Bucharest, Vilnius/Wilno/Vilna, and others), and about institutional nodes (for instance, journals, censorship), period conventions, transformations of genres, and figural nodes (the writer as national icon, figures of female identity, et cetera).54

This type of literary-history writing is often contrasted favourably, by its proponents, with "the linear mode of historical discourse" or with "single, critical recitation[s] of dates, facts, or events."55 It is important to remem-

ber, however, that neither kind can describe literary history as it is in itself, or come closer to such an account than the opposite model, for it would be a mistake to believe in the idea of an account of literary history in its own terms. Conceptual relativity is in force here too. Rather, both representative practices have their advantages and drawbacks. To put it figuratively and very simply: pointillistic varieties seem especially well adapted to portraying the trees, while single, critical recitations probably fare better with the wood. What is important to emphasize in the present context, is that my general suggestions about how we should view the employment of the concept of literature in transcultural literary history are intended to apply to "pointillistic" historiography as well.

Literature Across Times and Cultures

The subject of the present volume is the concept of literature and its understanding and use in historical and transcultural literary studies. This introductory essay has been largely theoretical. The focus was on complexities in connection with the concept of literature, on how they should be conceived of, and on how they may be dealt with. Much more than theory is needed, however, for the successful employment of the concept in transcultural literary history. The seven essays that follow offer perspectives on the textual worlds of some important literary cultures. Taken together, the

56 True, the literary historian writes about a material that does, in itself, have an intrinsic mental perspective (or rather, innumerable such perspectives, since no two people or literary works will be identical in perspective). However the historian's task is not (normally regarded as being) that of reproducing this confusing multiplicity, but of making it comprehensible, from some point of view and for some purpose. There is no way of doing that which is absolutely privileged ontologically or epistemologically, since an external perspective (that of the historian or collective of historians) must inevitably be introduced. This is why I do not concur with Damrosch when he writes (my italics): "Any global perspective on literature must acknowledge the tremendous variability in what has counted as literature from one place to another and from one era to another; in this sense, literature can best be defined pragmatically as whatever texts a given community of readers takes as literature." Damrosch, What Is World Literature?, p. 14. (Since the concept of literature did not actually exist before the eighteenth century, it is also difficult to accept the idea that there were texts in earlier cultures that "counted as literature," but I already pointed that out apropos of Konrad.)

57 There is a well-known distinction between narrative and encyclopedic literary history, introduced by David Perkins, Is Literary History Possible?, chs. 2 and 3. The distinction is reminiscent of my loose contrast between two types of literary-history writing, but I do not believe that Perkins's concepts are exactly what I have mind.
essays should provide some idea of the variable contexts which we have to take into account when we do transcultural literary history using the concept of literature as one of our tools. I will now give a brief overview of the essays (deviating, in my presentation, from the order in which they appear in the volume).

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Traditional oral cultures usually display a number of genres that we are accustomed to calling literary: songs and narratives of various kinds—entertaining, practical, mythical, magical, or religious, often at one and the same time. They do not however have a concept of literature. (Such notions as ‘religion’ and ‘myth’ are of course also western categories without exact counterparts in the cultures in question. Implicit or explicit indigenous categorizations often exist, but for obvious reasons they cannot correspond to their western counterparts except very approximately.)

The essays by Tord Olsson and Leif Lorentzon deal with oral literary cultures in Africa. Olsson’s “Experiences of Orature in Sahelian West Africa” is based mainly on his own fieldwork with Mande bards (or griots) in Mali and takes a particular interest in their sensuous conception of oral literature. The bards say that they “eat literature” and that they are “eaten by literature.” According to Olsson, their relation to oral literature is expressed by means of gustatory metaphors based on a specific philosophy of language, suggesting a conception of literature orientated towards the tact-

While Olsson writes about West African literature, Lorentzon concentrates on East Africa in his study “Let the House Be Dead Silent: A Discussion of Literariness in East African Oral Literature.” Coming from comparative literature, Lorentzon does not himself know the languages of the literatures under discussion. His focus, however, is not on the oral texts themselves but on their classification and conceptualization as literature by critics. Lorentzon looks at the critical discussion of African, especially East African, oral literature from Ruth Finnegan’s classic Oral Literature in Africa (1970) onwards, reflecting on the writers’ criteria for applying

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the concept of literature and concentrating especially on Karin Barber's studies of Yorùbá oral poetry (Nigeria) and on Peter Seitel's research on Haya verbal art (Tanzania).

In literate cultures genres multiply with time. Religious, administrative, and economic texts of many kinds are created; some of them are viewed by the culture itself as part of its central heritage. Texts that might be characterized as philosophical or historical can be written down, as well as poems and perhaps also songs and stories. Personal letters will abound, and texts of an autobiographical nature may also come into existence. Oral genres, naturally, also persist.

As I have already indicated, the very early literate cultures—such as the Mesopotamian and the Ancient Egyptian—appear to lack concepts that are at all comparable to 'literature.' Such concepts begin to emerge in various civilizations during the centuries immediately before and after the beginning of the Common Era. Idema and Haft date the relevant Chinese concept of wen to the third century CE.59 The Greek concept of 'poetry' ('poiēsis') is an even earlier example.60 (In the West, however, the two concepts of 'poetry' and 'rhetoric' tended to combine to express the category of culturally valued secular writing which fell under concepts of 'literature' such as the Chinese wen, the Sanskrit kāvya, and the Arabic adab.61) In the words of Idema and Haft, the literature-like concepts cover those texts which are "felt to be of general educational value and which are, accordingly, regarded as part of the necessary intellectual baggage of every cultured person." If we call this "literature," it is literature in the sense of 'prestigious writing,' not literature in the "restricted" sense or in the sense of 'imaginative literature.'

This is the structuring of the "literary" field that we have in "classical" literate cultures—basically, in all literate cultures up to the eighteenth century, when the break referred to above occurred. Aspects of the system come to the fore in most of the remaining five essays in the volume.

60 According to Andrew Ford, the idea of poiēsis as "a craftsmanly kind of 'making'" producing songs arose in the fifth century BCE, and a notion of literature (in the wide sense) in the fourth century BCE. Ford, The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2002), esp. pp. 93 (with the quote), 231.
Two of these essays concern Chinese literary culture. Martin Svensson Ekström ("One Lucky Bastard: On the Hybrid Origins of Chinese 'Literature'") studies the beginnings of literature in the sense of imaginative, presentational literature in China, concentrating especially on the *Shijing* (Book of Odes; ca 1000 to ca 600 BCE). Svensson Ekström suggests that the discourse found in these poems developed out of several different high-status forms: the divinatory or mythic *Yijing* (the Book of Changes), the historiographic bronze inscriptions, and the hymns and rituals performed in ancestral temples. He also attempts to demonstrate how some poems in the *Shijing* engage in a play with rhetorical patterns which lends them a partially self-referential character, making them "poetic" even in the Jakobsonian sense.

There is a rich tradition of Chinese thinking about *wen*, literature-in-the-wide-sense as it is classically conceived in China, at least from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) onwards. Marja Kaikkonen's "Becoming Literature: Views of Popular Fiction in Twentieth-Century China" begins with a brief overview of central aspects of the classical Chinese "literary" system, highlighting not least its elitist character. This lays the foundation for her discussion, in the remainder of her paper, of the changing views of popular fiction in China. She argues that there has been a gradual and difficult movement away from traditional, condescending reactions, a movement which has had to force its way through massive elite resistance. Kaikkonen suggests that these changes may be viewed—within the larger perspective of modernization—as a slow, non-voluntary adaptation on the part of the elite to the egalitarian idea, and that such developments are indeed found in both the West and the East.

Chinese civilization exerted massive influence on neighbouring peoples. For example, the Chinese writing system was adopted in Japan in the fourth century CE (though it was eventually largely supplemented with others), and native Japanese literature in Chinese actually played an important role up to the nineteenth century. In 1868 however, the Meiji restoration opened the gates to western influence, something which soon also had consequences for the literary field. In her article, "Japanese Literary Histo-

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ry Writing: The Beginnings," Gunilla Lindberg-Wada describes how the word *bungaku* (‘learning’; originally a Chinese loan word: *wenxue*) was turned into a native synonym of the modern western concept of literature and how national histories of literature started to be written, bringing a new national literary canon into existence. Her focus is on the first comprehensive history of Japanese literature, the two-volume *Nihon bungakushi* published in 1890, and on how the new tendencies interact with earlier indigenous perspectives associated with the school of “national learning,” *kokugaku*.

According to a speculative but highly thought-provoking idea put forward by Earl Miner in his *Comparative Poetics* (1990), all literary cultures except that of the West have based their most fundamental understanding of literature on lyrical poetry.64 Because Aristotle took drama as his starting-point, western tradition came to focus on the “mimetic,” but all other poetics, especially those of the East, are described by Miner as belonging to the “affective-expressive” kind.65 Miner finds it difficult to come to terms with Indian literature and leaves it out of his discussion, but he indicates that he regards Indian literature, too, as being lyric-based.66

Without relating specifically to Miner’s distinction between “mimetic” and “affective-expressive” poetics, Gunilla Gren-Eklund centers her account of Indian views of literature around the concept of poetry in “The Pleasure of Poetry—Sanskrit Poetics and *kāvya*.” She starts with a broad sketch of Indian literary traditions, but her main emphasis is on Sanskrit literary culture, its genre system and, principally, its concept of poetry, *kāvya*. As part of her argument, Gren-Eklund also points to ways in which this concept is similar to, and differs from, concepts of literature of the present-day type. In this connection she offers in-depth discussions of key passages in a number of Sanskrit texts about poetics from different periods, including the *Kāvyālāhkhāra* by Bhāmaha (ca 700 CE), the *Kāvyamīmāṁsā* by Rājaśekhara (first half of the tenth century CE?), and the *Kāvyaprakāśa* by Mammaṭa (shortly before 1100 CE).

Bo Holmberg’s “Adab and Arabic Literature” is a presentation of the traditional Arabic notion of *adab*, which used to mean something like ‘education’ or ‘(good) manners’ in classical Arabic culture and is now used in Modern Written Arabic as a near equivalent to “literature.” Holmberg

64 Miner is no doubt thinking of imaginative literature.
66 Ibid., p. 8, note 4.
emphasizes the fact that Arabic did not traditionally have a word for "literature" in its modern sense. He explicates the meaning of adab and some other terms with similar import, while attempting to explain the difficulties of capturing traditional Arabic literary culture in established western categories. His study of the vacillating semantic content of the word “adab” thus becomes simultaneously an introduction to important characteristics of Arabic literary culture and to some of its major changes over time.

After "classical" literary cultures comes a gradual though very decisive shift. In the West, complex social, economic, and intellectual developments successively created a new situation, and new categorizations, in the field of texts. The modern western concept of literature is the outcome of these developments. There is no simple explanation for what happened, but, against the backdrop of the general societal changes, the emergence of a more distinct concept of empirical truth, and the growing prestige of the sciences, no doubt assisted in widening the felt gap between fact and fiction, or between what I have called above the informational and the presentational. The increased social differentiation and the more pronounced individualism tended to push genres such as lyrical poetry and (the earlier disdained) fictional prose narrative into the foreground in the latter kind of discourse at the expense of the epic and the drama. This helped to create the new concept of literature, which successively came to be centred on the fictive and on the novel, not on the true and the well-expressed.

The modern concept of literature already formed an integral part of the western culture with which western imperialist expansion confronted all the civilizations mentioned above in the course of the nineteenth century. Eventually the concept entered these cultures, or most of them, a process highlighted in Lindberg-Wada’s essay, but also commented on in other contributions (Kaikkonen, Gren-Eklund, Holmberg). It has already been mentioned (in connection with Lindberg-Wada’s paper) that “literature” received a Japanese calque in the Chinese loan-word bungaku. From Japan the word “bungaku” with its new meaning was re-exported to China in the early twentieth century in its original Chinese form, wenxue, now the Chinese word for “literature” (see the contribution by Kaikkonen). Sanskrit recruited the indigenous term sāhitya for the same purpose (Gren-Eklund), while adab was made to play the role of the native modern concept of literature in Arabic literary culture (Holmberg).

67 Cf., however, note 14 above.
This is not to say that the literary civilizations of the world gave up their established perspectives on textual culture under pressure from the modern western notion of literature. It appears impossible to deny that western ideas have had considerable impact in this area as well, but how pervasive and deep this impact has been is open to discussion. For instance, the idea of aesthetic autonomy, relatively prominent in the (admittedly very heterogeneous) western thinking about literature, has certainly not found universal acceptance (as is illustrated, here, especially in Kaikkonen's essay).

There is no predetermined pattern to which the seven essays conform. In part, they offer broad, comparatively popular introductions to their respective literary cultures—their genres, their thinking about literature, their central concept(s) for delimiting belles-lettres (Gren-Eklund, Holmberg, the opening in Kaikkonen). In part, they concentrate on specific aspects of the culture in question: its beginnings (Svensson Ekström), its conceptions of the refined and the popular (Kaikkonen), the concrete practices surrounding literature in the culture (Olsson), modern attempts to apply concepts of literature to the culture (Lindberg-Wada, Lorentzon).

I believe, however, that the essays jointly give a concrete and convincing idea of the complexity of the sphere which we are used to referring to as the field of literature. This is the main reason for bringing them together in this context. For there are at least three things that you need if you are to employ the concept of literature successfully in transcultural literary history, and one of these is sufficient knowledge of the literary cultures with which you are dealing: of their texts, of their social practices and the intellectual and societal background of these, of their conceptualizations of the field that we are used to calling literary.

Secondly, one must have a relatively firm grasp of the concept of literature and of the complexities involved in its use. That is what I have first and foremost attempted to offer in this introduction. Thirdly, one must also be able to formulate a worthwhile investigative aim and to design one’s concept of literature in a way that ensures it supports that aim. To my mind, that problem has no general, universal solution. Within transcultural literary history, many quite different pursuits are both legitimate and possible, and the field can and must be represented partly differently, and in partly different terms, depending on one’s choice of subject and vantage point.
This observation does not imply any fundamental relativism. I can see no compelling reason to doubt the possibility of literary-history knowledge, nor to look sceptically on the possibility of designing concepts of literature—or other intellectual categories—capable of supporting and assisting such insights.  

68 Some of the material and argument in this essay has been presented in earlier studies or talks. I would like to mention especially the papers “Global Literary History and the Conception of Literature” (read at the XVIth ICLA congress in Pretoria in 2000, forthcoming in the conference proceedings), “Literary History and Conceptual Relativity” (read at the 2002 annual meeting of ICLA’s Committee on Literary Theory in Dubrovnik), “The Possibility of Global Literary History”, in Suthira Duang Samosorn et al. (eds.), Re-imagining Language and Literature for the 21st Century: Selected Proceedings of the XXII International Congress of FILLM Held at Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand from 19-23 August 2002 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), and “The Concept of Literature and Literary History” (read at the XVIIth ICLA congress in Hong Kong in 2004). There is naturally also an overlap with my article “The Concept of Literature.”
Introduction

On a very general level, this essay is concerned with what in a certain place and in a certain time is considered to be literature, and how something traditionally excluded from this category is gradually moving toward inclusion. Literature in a culture is defined by its intellectuals, and the concrete manifestation of the definition exists in the form of the literary canon. Although usually a stable institution, the canon is subject to gradual change, but very little is known about how such change occurs, or why. This essay wants to illustrate a specific instrumental way in which the (Chinese) literary canon is maintained as a canon, and how changes in the canon are allowed to take place. Thus it will hopefully shed light on some mechanisms through which culture—our understanding of culture—is subjected to change. The change in question is concerned with the relationship between elite culture and popular culture, and with the gradual legitimization of a non-elite cultural form, popular fiction. The legitimization appears to be one step towards the inclusion of popular fiction into the literary canon, and it is achieved by new ideas or revisions of old thinking introduced or supported by important political or cultural figures, by rational arguments or rationalizations, by reinterpretations of history, and so on. As the essay shows, this development is in no way straightforward, and many digressions along the way act as backlashes. It seems to me that within the wider framework of modernization, a process characterized by egalitarian ideas, the above change could be anticipated. It corresponds with the egalitarian ideology to the extent that it diminishes the gap between the elite and the non-elite. At the same time, this very development can be seen as a gradual process through which the elite or elite thinking reluctantly accommodates the egalitarian idea.
A typical change in literary canons in many cultures in the modern era has been in the reappraisal of fiction.¹ This has meant that the status of fiction has been enhanced at the expense of other genres. In Europe this process was a prolonged one and it has therefore been more difficult to see it as a process. Furthermore, the reluctance of European elites to accept the egalitarian idea, shown as resistance to various egalitarian reforms such as universal education or suffrage, has practically been erased from the history books of Europe, which for a long time have proudly displayed the winning side only, that is the Enlightenment. In China, on the other hand, modernization has taken another path and pace, and, consequently, this process can be observed more easily, as much of it has been compressed into the twentieth century. In China, the two separate parts of the process coincide: both the inclusion of fiction into the literary canon, and the development of more tolerant attitudes toward popular fiction. It is the latter process that this essay sets out to describe.

The first part of the essay briefly introduces the traditional Chinese way of differentiating between canonized literature and (popular) fiction, while the second presents my understanding of the role of popular fiction in modernization. The main part of the essay then illustrates the growth of more tolerant views toward popular fiction in China, through an analysis of the views of a few representative thinkers, writers and literary critics on fiction or popular fiction.

Literature and Popular Fiction

Written Chinese uses thousands of different characters, which take years to learn and master. Until the first half of the twentieth century, the written language maintained a standard and ideal originating at least as far back as the early Christian era, known as classical Chinese. As the discrepancy between this classical Chinese language and the spoken language increased over the centuries, written Chinese has long been a de facto foreign language, even for those whose mother tongue was Chinese. In addition, an elitist educational system exclusively designed to train high-level government officials led to a scarcity of reading and writing skills in imperial

¹ The space here does not allow for a discussion of the historically and globally complex term "novel."
Certain writing skills were naturally needed among merchants and other professionals, but the lack of a written standard in the vernacular, as well as the lofty ambitions set for the exercise of literariness, restricted writing among non-literati groups to practical purposes.

Classical Chinese is the medium of the huge corpus of classical Chinese literature still in existence. Literature here could be said to correspond to literature in the wide sense, and includes philosophical, historical and other works already canonized in ancient China, state-commissioned historiographical writing from two millennia and, representing the more regular options for both professional and leisure writing among the literati during most of the past two millennia, various types of short prose texts and poetry. Classical literature has been an object of study, commentary, anthologizing, collecting, and printing for as long as it has existed. Traditional bibliographers divide it into four classes, “Canonical Works” (also termed “The Classics”) (jing), “Histories” (shi), “Philosophers” (zi), and “Collections” (ji). The last category is often translated with “belles-lettres,” as it consists of the collected works of individual authors, which in turn were mainly made up of short prose texts and poetry.

The main requirement of classical literature was that it was to be “true”: “to be a correct depiction of the moral situation and the feelings it evoked. Literature could fulfill its task of general edification only if what it taught

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3 Cf. Anders Pettersson’s distinction between “literature in the ‘imaginative literature’ sense” and “literature-in-the-wide-sense” in his introduction to this volume.

4 As an illustration of the great variety of texts covered by the simple term “short prose” we can take Yao Nai, A Classified Compendium of Ancient-style Prose and Verse (Guwen ci lei zuan) (1732–1815), which divides short prose into 13 genres, with a number of subgenres: 1. essays and arguments, 2. prefaces and colophons, 3. memorials and deliberations, 4. letters, 5. compositions presented at parting, 6. edicts and orders, 7. biographies and obituaries, 8. epitaphs and necrologies, 9. miscellaneous records, 10. admonitions and inscriptions, 11. eulogies and panegyrics, 12. prose poetry, 13. elegies and funeral orations. See William H. Nienhauser, Jr., “Prose,” in William H. Nienhauser (ed.), The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), p. 96. For brief explanations, see pp. 96–97. Although these categories may appear artificial to us, they were all well-defined, living options of deliberated literary expression for the Chinese literati through most of the imperial era and to some extent even later.
was the truth." In this respect, the ancient canonical works were regarded as superior texts created by the sages of antiquity, which in the Chinese case refers to at least twenty-five centuries back in time. All other literature was then seen as a continuation of the tradition of the Classics, which formed a constant point of reference and comparison. "As the Classics do include examples of historical and philosophical texts, the Histories (shi) and Philosophers (zi) of later centuries could logically be regarded as continuing these aspects of the Classics." When it comes to the collections (ji), poetry was seen as a continuation of The Classic of Poetry (also called The Book of Odes (Shijing), and "each of the short prose forms [...] was traced back, sometimes with great ingenuity, to a prototype in one of the Classics." Clearly, in this scheme the production of any new piece of writing was conditioned by the eventual legitimization supplied by an ancient model, and the ancient models made up the standard against which every deviation was measured and criticized.

As a consequence of the requirement for truthfulness, works of fiction, "which consciously create imaginative reality," were per definition excluded from the scope of literature in traditional China, irrespective of genre. Fiction, being untrue, was condemned as "misleading and inciting to moral corruption," and encouraging "adultery and banditry," and individual works were frequently made the target of bans or were destroyed, as it was felt that the influence of fiction on the populace should be restricted.

Fictional material could be included in literature only if it was presented as historical. Thus myths and legends "tended to be sobered up into dry 'factual' accounts" when written down. Despite the lack of official recognition, fiction (including drama) was nevertheless produced and consumed

7 Ibid.
9 On traditional views on fiction, see Idema and Haft, A Guide to Chinese Literature, pp. 56–60.
11 Idema and Haft, A Guide to Chinese Literature, p. 56.
by its very censors, the literati—for entertainment. Such double standards may appear paradoxical, but would seem—on second thoughts—a natural consequence of the existence of any authoritative and categorical system, in this case the literary canon.

Short pieces of fiction are preserved in China at least from the past fifteen centuries, and they have formed several different genres of stories. The classical Chinese language of these works ensured that they were never an option for the common people. Longer fiction never really developed in the classical language at all, before a very brief boom of anachronistic print culture in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Instead, the major fictional tradition was almost exclusively vernacular, and therefore excluded from the considerations of the literati, who regarded the vernacular as “the vulgar language of the unlearned.” The great mass of popular fiction consumed by the common people in Imperial China was in oral (and vernacular) form. From as early as the Song dynasty (960–1279) there are systematic descriptions of professional storytelling, which was often an urban activity, and the oldest dramatic texts preserved are from the beginning of the fourteenth century, witness to a wealth of scenic performances. From at least the Song dynasty onwards, but particularly during the Ming (1368–1644), popular vernacular storytelling is considered to have contributed to the appearance of vernacular stories in writing. During the Ming dynasty at the latest, episodes from storytelling began to be compiled into large works of fiction that used either the vernacular language or a mixture of the vernacular and simple classical Chinese. Although mainly enjoyed by educated individuals, these written genres were never considered a part of literature as defined by the intellectual establishment.

If we try to apply the categories “non-literary texts” (functional and non-aesthetic) and “literature” to the Chinese case, it seems that we need some modifications. “Non-literary texts” certainly existed which were functional, practically technical, and non-aesthetic such as engineering, medical,
etc. manuals and other professional texts, and which therefore also escaped literati attention. But, on the other hand, what was venerated in China as literature was not limited to non-functional or aesthetic texts. Historical texts, for example, were more functional than aesthetic. Literature also had to be “true.” To cover all texts in Imperial China, however, it appears that one would need to add a parallel third category, fiction, non-functional, aesthetic, untrue, and non-venerated.

In other aspects, differences are not as striking. The Chinese prerequisites for works that could be counted as literature would—had they been formulated in similar terms—have been identical with those applied to literature in the modern western sense, inasmuch as literature in China certainly was “of central cultural importance”—works of literature in China were, after all, cherished century after century; they were also “carefully and expertly formed,” and encompassed “beauty of form” (which I already consider an aesthetic quality), and they were definitely “expected to give rise to experiences whose main value consists in some sort of inner enrichment that is difficult to describe.”¹⁹ That this inner enrichment in China was not expected to remain on the level of aesthetic exhilaration but, through such an experience, to contribute to the moral betterment of the reader ought naturally to be another reason for extending the description “verbal art” to these works.

In my opinion, these texts were even presentational, in the sense of “valuable [in themselves] as a source of experience,”²⁰ a quality which I think we can assume was felt to be inherent in works of any genre that were compiled into anthologies for later generations to enjoy, admire and comment on, as was done with classical Chinese literature. This applies even to pieces which were initially written for a functional, seemingly informative/manipulative purpose: they were expected to produce the intended effect through the demonstration of the writer’s literary capacity. The imperial official who formulated memorials to the throne on urgent problems knew that if he managed to express himself with superior power, style, and erudition, his writing would convince the emperor of the importance of his mission and move the emperor to act along the lines he suggested. The quality of the writing, more than the message as such, was seen as instrumental. Poor writing might embarrass the emperor for having employed such an unqualified person, and thereby even obliterate the mes-

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¹⁹ The quotations are from Pettersson’s introduction to this volume.
²⁰ Pettersson’s introduction to this volume.
sage. The functional message was delivered to the addressee at the initial reading, while at least from the second reading on, the reader(s) enjoyed the text as presentational discourse, as “verbal art,” demonstrating the power of good writing on the human mind. As all “verbal art” and other valued writing anywhere, even such memorials would later be consumed both for the enjoyment of reading an excellent piece of writing and as paragons to emulate. As the imperial official picked up his brush to write, he was well aware of this entire scenario of effects that successful writing could achieve.

Literature in the above scheme would include the classical-language, canonized genres of prose and poetry, while fiction would encompass prose fiction, drama, and storytelling. As might be expected from its placement in this scheme, fiction in traditional China was banished beyond art, beyond scholarly study, and beyond systematic criticism—beyond typical elitist activities which serve to create and maintain values through cultural products. In every respect, then, fiction in traditional China seems to have held a position similar to that of “popular literature” in the modern western world, at least up to the mid-twentieth century.

Alternative views on literature in China were made possible and necessary only when modern development started changing the basic conditions of the traditional literati and their culture. An important milestone on that road was the abolition of the civil examinations in 1905 and the subsequent expansion of the lay educational system. The collapse of the imperial order in 1911, of course, constituted another milestone. The same applies to the replacement of classical Chinese by colloquial Chinese as the official medium of written communication in China; this was effected through gradual reforms, e.g. by primary schools employing the vernacular instead of the classical language in first- and second-grade Chinese language instruction from autumn 1920.21

As such changes were the result of long-term efforts by reform-minded politicians and intellectuals, it is perhaps not surprising that the “new” language, the vernacular (baihua), was first appropriated for a modern, modernist, elite, avant-garde literature, strongly influenced by foreign modern literature and, consequently, including fiction. This was a strong break with the Chinese tradition. The first works of this type of “modern” ver-

Vernacular literature appeared in 1919, and have been celebrated ever since, both in China and by foreign China scholars, as heralds of a new age and new values. That there had existed a rich vernacular fiction—of a popular character—for quite some time, and a vernacular press—also of a popular character—was ignored at the time as totally uninteresting and politically incorrect, as will be illustrated below.

A few terms need some attention here. The Chinese imperial, dynastic monarchy was run, beyond the court, as a civil meritocracy, where at least the blueprint decreed that the state examinations were the one and only way to important government positions. That this system produced an elite, consisting of those who had passed the examinations, is self-evident. In China, this group comprised those who were best (and similarly) educated throughout the country, it was therefore an intellectual elite, the literati; to a large extent, this group also coincided with the power, political and economic elites of the country. The self-evident existence of this elite for more than a millennium is still felt today, and it has been conspicuous all through the twentieth century. The imperial Chinese meritocracy is recognized as an unusually successful one, as it allowed a high degree of social mobility; by their own efforts, non-elite individuals were able to join the elite: if I didn’t make it, a cousin would do so sooner or later. Perhaps it is this positive quality of the meritocracy that has allowed elitism to remain acceptable to many Chinese even since the demise of the empire in 1911, and in spite of Mao Zedong’s egalitarian efforts.

Elitism as a widespread attitude has certain consequences in society: elite values are generally accepted and made a norm, while non-elite values are disapproved of. It is seen as natural that everyone should strive to become a part of the elite. This means that the opposite of the elite, the non-elite, or, the popular, becomes a non-quality, a lack of elite qualities, and is defined through negatives, something which few people consciously want to identify with. Popular qualities also thereby to some extent become subconscious and thus invisible. It is from this kind of position that our European view of popular culture has gradually grown. I feel that we are still not quite conscious of all the aspects that in our minds make up the popu-

lar. This is, I think, the main reason why definitions of the popular are lacking. The definition of what comprises elite quality is naturally made by those who are part of the elite. To the extent that non-elite groups admire everything that is elite while living a non-elite life, a situation with double standards arises: lofty ideals and mean reality, and an inability to live up to the ideals. Perhaps it is such a meritocratic understanding of “winner vs. loser” that so often makes elitism feel like a natural, intuitive solution, and egalitarianism as a man-made concept of social engineering, an understanding that has been demonstrated often enough in both east and west. For my part, I am writing neither for nor against elites or elite culture. What interests me are the ways in which cultural matters are maneuvered and their hows, whys and wherefores.

When this essay refers to elite literature, it is to the literature appreciated and praised by the elite and upheld by the establishment through the literary canon, whatever time or place it is applied to. Conversely, popular literature or popular fiction refer to the literature, especially fiction, disdained by the establishment but consumed by large groups of so-called ordinary people. Such literature today is often termed “entertainment literature,” for at least the following reasons: 1. To admit that it is not consumed only by the so-called ordinary people but even by those who belong to an elite. 2. To signal that the speaker is conscious of the elite—popular dichotomy and makes an effort to view the two groups objectively and to refrain from automatically situating him/herself in the elite. 3. To admit that entertainment, as one of the conceivable functions of literature and as one of the needs of its readers, is legitimate, and that this need is not inherently of low social status. Such attitudes in the western world have evolved over a very long time, but only during the last few decades have they aroused the interest of academia. We should keep this in mind when considering such developments in China.

A terminological reservation: Popular fiction is a part of popular literature, which again is a part of popular culture. Only some of the writings referred to below address popular fiction specifically, while in other cases it is included in the larger categories of popular literature or popular culture. This results in a somewhat mixed use of terms. The topic of this essay is popular fiction, and at times I will expect the reader to make the deduction.
Modernization and Popular Fiction

The treatment of popular fiction in the western world bears many similarities to the Chinese situation that this essay sets out to describe. Despite the long history and large amount of popular fiction, particularly since the eighteenth century, the academic study of popular literature is a very recent endeavour, even in comparison with other disciplines that study the conditions of the common people. Both the development of print culture and of popular reading during the last two or three centuries are typical parts of the modern project: the press developed for the sake of growing political participation, and reading fiction evolved to fill the spare time of working urbanites, who no longer had access to collective village pastimes. From a nineteenth century enlightened elite point of view, which cherished the idea of representational government, the press was a respectable tool for necessary debates and information, something that even the elite needed. As such it appeared to be a logical part of egalitarian endeavors. But were there any attempts to treat the cultural consumption of the great unnumbered in a similar, understanding and legitimizing manner? Although we know that the elite consumed popular fiction just as it consumed newspapers, I am afraid the answer is no. I feel we ought to find out why or, if we already know, say it out loud. Strangely enough, it seems that the Chinese case, in its temporally concentrated form, may just show us some curious parallels.

I am convinced that cultural products are produced and consumed as a response to certain needs, whether conscious or unconscious, material or immaterial. Producers and consumers may also have more than one need to satisfy. I believe that this also applies to literature. We know that today many writers of popular literature both in China and in Europe write in order to make money, and care less about whether they earn fame as a writer as long as their products sell well. Other writers try their hardest to please the intellectual elite of a linguistic community, choosing to discard all considerations of earnings, but becoming desperate if the elite critics’ response to their work is negative. They obviously see cultural production as a way of becoming an active part of an elite. Among consumers of culture, one of the needs is entertainment, and it is natural that various tastes and habits rule our choices in this area. Some people may consume certain cultural products because, through the experience of consuming, they become part of a certain group to which they wish to belong—often such a group would be the cultural elite. This is corroborated by the fact that people purchase
books not only to read them but also to display them; in that way they signal that their "acquisition" of a book through reading may not become evident from what they say, but that it will be proven by the presence of the book on their book-shelf. A similar behavior is clearly illustrated by contemporary youth cultures, where group semiotics have an important social function.

Hardly any popular literary reading would be done with the aspiration of joining the cultural elite, while much of the reading of popular literature can certainly be done for the fun of being entertained. But what does it mean to be entertained? Recent studies of popular reading, seemingly for entertainment, have revealed that the question is much more complex than it seems. Various aspects of recognition, identification, learning, and being informed are involved, even in non-challenging reading. I cannot see any reason why the situation would have been different earlier on in the history of popular literature. Quite the opposite, it seems that the great flourishing of popular reading and thus also the production of fiction, in particular, in early modernization appeared in answer to specific needs among the common people. Let us try to understand what at least some of these needs were.

All through modernization, rapid change has been a problem that most people have had to cope with. It is conceivable that some human mental mechanisms lead us to associate non-change with safety and change with unsafety, and therefore we favor non-change; at least experts on stress tell us that it is aberrations from the "normal" that build up stress. Change is also something for which our traditional knowledge, originating in forms that were dependent on natural phenomena, has not prepared us. This applies, for example, to peasant culture: the nature of a farmer's work is cyclical and based on the accumulation of experience from time immemorial, while change—unlike variation—is alien to the system. There may be unpredictabilities in peasant life, but most of them can be met with the assurance that things will return to normal. This contrasts strongly with the modern project, where the individual leaves his/her traditional life behind, and moves somewhere else without any guarantees, only hopes, and the absolute need to cope with entirely different—and changing—circumstances.

Many of the changes that modernization has caused are therefore challenging, either for individuals or groups or both; this was apparent in Europe and China a century ago and is still so today. At the same time such changes have been very inspiring, particularly for those whose lot in traditional society was not the best and for whom the changes could mean improvement. For the common people the changes brought by modernization have come to mean economic opportunities in and around industries, resulting in a rising standard of living, but also in a simultaneous devaluation of traditional handicrafts; this has sent country people away from home, looking for careers of acceptable types in new surroundings. In this situation the experiences their traditional environment has supplied them with are of little value, as they cannot properly anticipate the dilemmas which modern urban life may pose for the newcomer. In that predicament, the experience obtainable through reading, through the press and through popular fiction, can be invaluable: it often comes from an urban source, from someone who obviously has already found his/her way in the modern, urban world, and can perhaps offer guidance through the changing circumstances. People who in their original surroundings could live their lives according to a traditional, given model and within a given social slot, badly needed guidance in making their own choices among the possibilities and pitfalls of modern life. I am convinced that it is such new needs that popular fiction was and is able to satisfy. Typical examples of this kind of fiction in China are the works of the enormously popular writer Zhang Henshui, which through detailed description allowed the reader to acquaint him/herself with the important practicalities of modern urban life, while also telling an entertaining story. To take a simple, concrete example: through a reading of Ping-Hu tongche (Shanghai Express) the reader-cum-new-rail-traveller was spared much loss of face at the railway ticket booth, as s/he already knew the differences between first, second and third class prices and service levels.25

Imagined or not, popular fiction pictured options in life which modernizing individuals needed to know in order to reach their personal conclusions about what to strive for in their own life. For example, the anonymity of urban life made moral questions crucial for the newcomers: without the social control of a family and a small rural community, anyone, theoreti-

25 Zhang Henshui, Shanghai Express (Ping-Hu tongche), trans. William A. Lyell (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 1997). This novel, first serialized in 1935, even included a map of the route of the train.
cally at least, had the option of committing a crime. I am convinced that the appearance of crime fiction in early modernity both in Europe and in China was related to the need among popular readers to consider the consequences of the various moral choices suddenly available to them. Another important need among readers must have been to become acquainted, as a precaution, with the various forms of criminality that one might encounter in new surroundings—this aspect appears conspicuously in Chinese crime fiction of the 1980s. This is not to say that crime fiction lacked other functions.26 Similarly, love stories can be seen as being informative about various kinds of liaisons, marriages, etc. conceivable in the new conditions, and about how those involved manage them, what problems and rewards they encounter, and how those around them react to the choices they make. Such knowledge, such consciousness seem essential for the making of the modern urban individual, who is expected to make his/her own unique choices about his/her personal life without the counseling that traditional structures could offer.

Technological progress in early modernization also led to printed products becoming cheap enough for great numbers of people to buy, which further boosted the production and consumption of popular fiction. The symbiosis of the early modern press with fiction in serialized form also highlights the informational use fiction was put to.

Does this mean that fiction came before life? Yes, for a great many readers it did. Hundreds of intellectuals living in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s realized that their own urban lifestyle was itself a gold mine on which they were able to draw seemingly endlessly: all they had to do was to write stories about their friends’ or their neighbours’ lives, while out in the country there were thousands who thirsted for details about the allure that epitomised Shanghai. For these writers, life came before fiction; for their readers it was the other way round. I am also convinced that for many people in today’s Europe, fiction came before life. Through fiction, many of us became acquainted with a number of outlooks on life, family tragedies, successful (male) careers, love affairs, effective ways of ruining one’s life, and so on, long before it was our turn to make decisions about our own life. The modern individual needs the fictions to make the options visible.

26 On the modern qualities of a 1930s Chinese detective story, see my essay “The Detective in the Service of the Emperor, the Republic, and the Communist Party” in volume 3 of this series.
The proliferation of popular fiction in Europe coincides with the flourishing of the novel: “the new novel and the new reading public grew up together; and during the very years when the form was establishing its right to exist, a group which had been illiterate and unthinking came into intellectual life.” For a student of popular literature, it appears self-evident that it was popular fiction that was the mainstay in this development, with the biggest and most notable historical change effected through the growth of a popular readership, of the printing industry, and of print media—in other words, of fiction being printed. The changes in elite literature were minor in comparison, and consisted mainly of the addition of another genre—fiction—for the traditional purposes of an elite, for example, for the continued control of the kinds of cultural products that could be considered to be literature and therefore worthy of public, that is, elite, praise and attention.

Against this background of the history of modernization, the similarities in the development of modern popular culture, including popular fiction, in Europe and China are striking. The start was much earlier and more gradual in Europe, but once China started reforming during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the development there was very swift. One difference was that the Chinese elite, largely unaffected by European-type Enlightenment ideas, remained extremely elitist in its thinking. For the development of popular fiction this meant that if it has taken a long time for European popular fiction to become established as an object worthy of serious study and elite observation, then Chinese popular fiction has certainly not had an easier time. In both cases, it is the attitudes among the intellectual elites that have been decisive for the way that popular fiction has been treated in the cultural life of these two parts of the world, and to what extent it has become a part of the literary canon. Since literatures tend to be national concerns, the picture is much more diffuse in Europe with its multitude of national language literatures. In China, where the intellectual elite was unusually small and, at least until the mid-twentieth century, educationally rather homogeneous, its attitudes and activities vis-à-vis popular fiction make up a clearly distinguishable series of changing standpoints or strategies. It is these strategies that I want to illustrate and briefly discuss in this essay. The roles that popular fiction plays in late modern society remain outside its scope.


The Legitimization of Fiction

Liang Qichao has long been credited with having been the first intellectual in modern China to express a theoretical interest in popular literature. For him, popular culture, especially fiction, appeared to be an important channel through which the growth of a “new citizenry” could be promoted, a citizenry which would allow China to regain its earlier stature among nations. Recent research has shown that he had adopted his initial view on fiction directly from the writings of an American missionary named John Fryer (Fu Lanya). In an article on fiction in the *Wan guo gongbao (Chinese Globe Magazine)* 1895, Fryer wrote:

> In my humble opinion, when it comes to moving the human heart and making customs change, nothing comes up to fiction. Promoted wide and fast, works of fiction become known in every household after only a short time of circulation, and they easily cause habits to change. Of China’s accumulated evil practices today, three are the worst, namely opium, the eight-legged essay [of the examinations], and bound feet. Unless methods are found to improve these, there will never be a sign of wealth or strength. I now wish to ask those Chinese persons who want to see their country prosper to author fiction of a new flavor, to conceretely show the great harm of these three matters as well as ingenious methods for getting rid of each one of them, to make a record of them and to lecture on them, to structure and compile them, and thread them into volumes, so that when people read these, their hearts will be moved and their strength be set on expelling them. It is necessary that the wording is clear and the meaning interesting and elegant so that even women and children may understand them. When describing affairs, choose from those common today or in recent times, and on no account plagiarize old style, adopt no strange or curious approach so as not to startle the eye or frighten the heart [of the reader].

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30 Fu Lanya [John Fryer], “Qiu zhu shixin xiaoshuo qi” (“A Letter Pleading for the Production of Modern Fiction”). *Wan guo gongbao* (Chinese Globe Magazine) 77 (June 1895), as quoted in Yuan Jin, *Zhongguo wenxue guannian de jindai bianjie* (Modern Changes in the Chinese Concept of Literature), (Shanghai: Shanghai shehuike xueyuan chubanshe, 1996), p. 68. Fryer is identified in Wang Lixin, *Meiguo chuanjiaoshi yu wan Qing Zhongguo xianzhaihua* (American Missionaries and Late-Qing China’s Modernization), (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1997), p. 518.—All the translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
This passage is the earliest appeal in China promoting "new fiction" for the purpose of changing the conduct of the people in order to get rid of what were seen as nationwide problems. Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei and other reformers, who were keen readers of the Chinese Globe Magazine, were to echo and develop this appeal in their writings. As these gentlemen knew no western languages, what they learnt about the west came through the writings and translations of western missionaries. While such sources were less problematic when it came to natural sciences, the western idea of literature that such missionary writings reflected was in fact seriously dated, corresponding definitely not to the contemporary informed view but rather to a medieval Christian didactic idea of literature.31 This view was not questioned by Liang or his reforming colleagues, for whom fiction was naturally a popular form of writing; instead, they welcomed it. Liang later expressed the same idea:

If one intends to renovate the people of a nation, one must first renovate its fiction. Therefore, to renovate morality, one must renovate fiction; to renovate religion, one must renovate fiction; to renovate politics, one must renovate fiction; to renovate social customs, one must renovate fiction; to renovate learning and arts, one must renovate fiction; and to renovate even the human mind and remold its character, one must renovate fiction. Why is this so? This is because fiction has a profound power over the way of man.32

Liang Qichao viewed fiction as a didactic means to a patriotic end, and thus joined the Confucians of old who agreed that writings and, consequently, also reading should be useful, an idea traditionally expressed through the phrase "writing is for conveying the truth" (wen yi zai dao).33 In practical terms, however, the question of the kind of fiction that lived up to the new requirements turned out to be a knotty one. Of the over 160 works of fiction that were sent to the Chinese Globe Magazine within nine months of Fryer's above appeal, none proved satisfactory to him.34 I am unaware of Liang Qichao ever having undertaken a systematic investiga-

31 Yuan Jin, pp. 67–68.
33 This sentence was coined by the philosopher Zhou Dunyi (1017–73), whose "formulation of the moralistic conception of literature was so influential that the slogan 'Literature is that by which one carries the Way,' or 'Literature is a vehicle of the Way' [...], became one of the two most often-quoted platitudes in Chinese literary criticism." See Liu, Chinese Theories of Literature, p. 114.
34 Yuan Jin, Zhongguo wenxue, p. 68.
tion of a similar character. Liang was concerned with what popular literature could do, or ought to do, not what it was. Liang Qichao’s type of utilitarian and “potentialist” vision came to dominate Chinese views of popular literature for most of the twentieth century, among radicals, leftists, and rightists alike.

Upgrading Folk Culture

A great upsurge of interest in folk literature occurred in China in the late 1910s. Folk literature, described in a number of terms, designated rural folklore, and as such had little to do with popular fiction, whether traditional or modern. However, this upsurge was an important step. A number of scholars at the National Beijing University, including Liu Fu (Liu Bannong), Zhou Zuoren, and Gu Jiegang set up in 1918 an office for collecting folk songs, and in 1922 they started the journal *Geyao zhoukan* (*Folksong Weekly*) in which to publish them. This journal attracted much attention, and resulted in the Fengsu diaochahui (Custom Survey Society) being established in 1923. Newspapers and journals started carrying special columns on folk literature, and the interest in folklore gradually spread to many parts of China, forming a whole movement.³⁵

In their enthusiasm over a renewed outlook on society and an earnest wish to share the best of folk literature with Chinese readers, many adherents of this view acquired a highly idealized and romantic vision of Chinese rural life and of peasants. This view was stereotyped as a pastoral idyll inhabited by tranquil peasants who went about their everyday chores and lived their sound life enjoying its Daoist simplicity.³⁶ This vision acquired nationalistic overtones from the 1920s onwards, when folk literature—the culture of the idyllic peasants—was found to be “the crystallization of the national spirit,” and therefore a means for national salvation.³⁷ We should note that one important quality in the traditional peasant is of course his voluntary subordination to authorities—a quality that elites know how to appreciate, perhaps particularly after a recent revolution.

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³⁶ For an account of the romantic idealization of rural life in the folk literature movement, see ibid., pp. 10–17.
³⁷ Ibid., p. 17.
This view of folk culture has had a strong and lasting influence in China. By romanticizing and preserving an outdated rural ideal and description of the common people, an intolerant attitude was established toward urbanites. In my view, this constituted a strong obstruction to the continued reception of modern popular culture which is basically urban and cosmopolitan, and which by comparison with the rural was made to appear less "national" and more "foreign," and therefore, by implication, unpatriotic and practically traitorous.

Among the early folklorists only Liu Fu, himself also a writer of popular fiction, showed an interest in urban popular culture. He even conducted some unique very early studies on popular story pamphlets in Shanghai. However, it seems that he was met with a lack of interest, if not contempt, and discontinued the work, consequently concentrating on collecting folk songs.

That even the acceptance of folk literature was an ideologically controversial issue is revealed by the fact that it continued to meet with opposition. While Qing regulations had banned folk songs as detrimental, Republican Chinese governments considered it equally natural to suppress folk culture on various pretexts, such as its "vulgarity" and its "corrupting influence on public morals." The Guomindang government in Nanjing continued this tradition even more harshly from 1928–29, launching campaigns called Pochu mixin yundong (Superstition Destruction Movement), aimed at eradicating local customs that were considered unsuitable. This caused severe setbacks to the folk literature movement, the proponents of which came to appear in a more radical light because of this opposition.

Folklore came to function as an ideological eye-opener for Chinese intellectuals with a slight modern orientation just as it had been for European

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39 Liu Fu, "Zhongguo zhi xiadeng xiaoshuo" ("Chinese Low-Grade Fiction"), in Zhao Jiabi (ed.), *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi* (Compendium of Chinese New Literature), 10 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1981), vol. 2, pp. 358–76. Liu’s article was written as early as in 1918.


41 Hung, *Going to the People*, p. 160.
intellectuals somewhat earlier. The acceptance of the idea that the cultural products of a lower, uneducated social group had a value of their own and made a difference to society as a whole was a clear step toward a more modern, egalitarian view of society and of different social groups.

At the same time, we should not forget that the idealization of an outdated lifestyle and/or a peripheral group is a favorite strategy among conservative elites; such activity easily removes the focus from more urgent considerations (e.g. the expanding and demanding group of urbanites), and has often hindered modern, egalitarian development. The Slavophile movement in nineteenth century Russia used this method to idealize Medieval peasant life, and many more examples can be found outside China.\(^42\)

**Radical Leftist Intolerance**

The large-scale radicalization of Chinese reform-minded intellectuals after the May Fourth movement in 1919 gave rise to a massive challenge to many established views. However, this did not apply to popular culture.\(^43\)

The radicalism of this period included the idea that literature ought to accomplish ideological awakening among the people, and thus patriotically participate in the modernization of the country with national salvation as the final goal. This echoed Liang Qichao’s call for “new fiction” for nation-building purposes, and thus meant a continuation of, not a break with, the earlier trend. Literature in general was divided by the radicals into “old” and “new,” the old designating all existing literature, the new being the kind that would be produced from then on in accordance with patriotic and political needs—but which had not yet come into being. It was understood that, if written by writers whose thinking was politically correct, the results would be perfect, while less perfect results were already seen as a

\(^{42}\) The strategy was also used by Richard Hoggart, who started what was called Cultural Studies in Birmingham 1964. Instead of peasants, he romanticized pre-war “authentic working-class life.” Even he ignored that it implied an acceptance of a much more authoritarian system than was the case among post-war workers. Today, more parallels can be found among post-colonial theories, which negate the benefits of modernization and, in the name of the common people’s so-called “right” to so-called “tradition,” deny them a modern life.

\(^{43}\) See, e.g., Denton (ed.), *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, pp. 115, 156–57.
sign that the writer did not possess the correct political awareness, a view that would predominate all through the Maoist period:

The first task of the New Culture movement was the negation of the old thought; the second task was the introduction of the new. But neither stage produced the required results. This is because the people engaged in these two tasks were not complete in their negation of the old thought; even less did they bear the responsibility of introducing the new. [...] No one is allowed to stand in the middle. You must come to this side, or go over there!

[...] Describe with true zeal what you see and hear on the battlefield, the acute sorrow and anger of the worker–peasant masses, heroic behaviour, the joy of victory! By so doing, you can ensure final victory, you will achieve outstanding merit [...] 44

Surprisingly, the radical writers did not question the ability of literature, or of the individual writer, to work such wonders; perhaps the idea flattered their vanity. However, by yielding to this ideological fallacy, Chinese writers were led into a trap from which they were not extricated until the 1980s.

In such radical leftist light, the existing popular literature could only be condemned: negative views prevailed about both traditional popular literature, considered “feudal,” 45 and modern popular literature, seen as “western” and “commercial.” 46 Of the two, the modern kind could appear even worse as it was not a part of China’s history, which after all the “feudal” type was. In line with the idealization and nationalization of peasant culture, a differentiation was further established between folk literature and popular literature. Among the radicals, this was accomplished by Mao Dun and Zhou Zuoren. Zhou termed folk literature “yuanshi wenxue” (primitive literature), 47 thus excusing it from intellectual criticism.

In 1921–22 Mao Dun and Zheng Zhenduo led a ferocious attack against urban popular literature, describing it as “mandarin ducks and butterflies”

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47 Zhou defined popular literature as written by the literati, and found two categories: caizi jiaren (stories of talents and beauties) such as Hongloumeng (The Story of the Stone), and xiayi (stories of knights errant) such as Shuihuzhuan (The Water Margin). See Hung, Going to the People, pp. 5–6, and Zhou Zuoren, “Guanyu tongsu wenxue” ("About Popular Literature"), Xiandai 2:6, pp. 795–97.
literature, a term with a strong derogatory tone.\textsuperscript{48} They saw such literature as pernicious; it poisoned the minds of its readers and kept them from reading more useful literature. Lu Xun, whose views were later given the monopoly in interpreting the literary field of the May Fourth era, joined the critics by slandering entertainment literature in numerous essays and even in his influential work \textit{Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi lüe} (\textit{A Brief History of Chinese Fiction}), which uses various derogatory terms for popular literature since the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{49} Thus the critics denied the common people the enjoyment of reading for entertainment, a retake of “writing is for conveying the truth.”

Even the commercialism of popular fiction writers was unbearable: instead of thinking of earning money, writers were to work unselfishly for the best of their own nation. That such writers would need someone else to feed them did not bother these critics, who often came from wealthy environments. At the same time, the critics were filled with indignation over the degenerate state in which they found Chinese urbanites. They hoped by their attack to prompt a literature that would revolutionize the Chinese masses. But in order to be influenced by the new literature, the masses needed to read it. This was the big problem.

Ever since the May Fourth movement, the discourse on popular readings centered on the question of what the new literature should be like in order to live up to its ideological and political ambitions and to be well received. Below the surface loomed the question of how to make the masses like the things they ought to like and read the things they ought to read. This fruitless discussion, a logical step from Liang Qichao’s call for “new fiction” which did not yet exist, engaged the Chinese intellectual elite for decades. These debates certainly generated ruthless criticism of the writers who


tried so hard, while nothing was done by way of analyzing contemporary popular literature itself. It was seen as simply too backward and self-evident, although it apparently had some good qualities:

The May Fourth-Marxist canonical interpretation of the development of modern Chinese literature would make it seem that popular literature simply did not exist, when the fact is that fiction of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly school [...] succeeded, where May Fourth writers failed, in reaching the very audience that the literary revolution had sought out.

At times the debate dealt with whether or how to use "traditional forms" of fiction in new, revolutionary works, but no agreement was reached.

One of the most caustic critics of the May Fourth writers and literary products since the mid-1920s was Qu Qiubai. He was extremely critical of the writers' attempts to approach the "popular," attempts which he considered totally inadequate and superficial:

The "May Fourth" New Culture Movement is as if wasted on the masses of the people! The May Fourth type of literature in the new classical Chinese (the so-called vernacular [baihua]) as well as the early revolutionary and proletarian literatures, which were merely a development of this literature, equal just another type of shark fin banquet for our Europeanized gentry, something which the masses of the people never get to taste.

Qu was an exception among his contemporaries in that he did not allow his own value judgements or aesthetic preferences to blind him to the importance of the cultural forms that the common people actually supported. He could even visualize workers and peasants in the future being schooled to the point where they were able to write their own literary works. But he belonged too much to May Fourth himself and was too Marxist to allow cultural matters to develop in their own way—they were to be improved through political and social means, as soon as possible. The working class of his day could still not produce its own literature,
this had to be done by "intellectuals who possessed a 'genuine' proletarian consciousness."  

From a popular point of view, the critics seemed to be saying: if we, elite writers, are patriotic enough to (sacrifice our elite careers and unselfishly) write for the needs of the common people, then the common people should (be grateful enough to) read these products to become patriotic as well. The attitudes published in these debates reveal how condescending, patronizing, and elitistic the attitudes of even the leftist radicals remained: certain people ("intellectuals with proletarian consciousness") could see the needs of the common readers ("working class") and consciously choose to produce works to agitate on their behalf and to enlighten the readers, who themselves apparently lacked the visions of the writers and were unable to see which things lay in their own interests. In practice, this leftist criticism seems rather to have served the purpose of establishing an elite status for a new group of critics than advanced the cause of popular literature.

As the politicization of Chinese cultural life deepened, it is interesting to note that radical May Fourth generation leftist writers had something very much in common with the Nationalist government (which they viewed as reactionary): their abhorrence of urban popular culture. While leftist writers and critics were busy arguing about how to "popularize" their literature (dazhonghua), the Nanjing government launched the Xin shenghuo yundong (New Life Movement) in 1934, with custom reform (fengsu gaige) programs not just to curb superstition and demolish temples, but also, for example, to ban public dancing in the capital and to stop popular music from being broadcast.

55 [Qu Qiubai], Qu Qiubai wenji, vol. 2, pp. 875–78. See also Pickowicz, Marxist Literary Thought in China, p. 149.
Crediting the People

In his *Zhongguo suwenxueshi* ("The history of Chinese vulgar literature"), published in 1938, Zheng Zhenduo wrote about various traditional Chinese literary forms, classical and vernacular, from antiquity onwards. Inspired by egalitarian views on culture and critical of the narrow literati understanding of which particular genres constituted "literature," Zheng wanted to vindicate folk culture through serious scholarly work, and did it by showing that most literary forms, no matter how high their status today, in actual fact have their roots deep in folk cultural forms. He contrasted such "vulgar literature" with "orthodox literature," i.e. canonized literature, but equated "vulgar literature" with what we now understand as folklore: created among the common people, anonymously and collectively created, and orally produced.

The impressive scholarship of Zheng's work was seen as scientific proof of his ideas, which were by no means new in China. Zheng's support for such a radical view was enthusiastically received by leftist intellectuals, and came to have a normative influence on literary historical writing in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) all through the twentieth century. It was only gradually, as more professional knowledge of the science of folklore was spread, that this view came to be revised, and the term "vulgar literature" was employed to designate traditional vernacular literature (fiction, drama and storytelling). This means that in many writings for years to

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58 The translation of this title is problematic: earlier the term "vulgar literature" was actually used in many contexts as the English equivalent of *suwenxue*. This is probably illustrative of the way many contemporaries understood the title. We might prefer the originally German term "trivial literature."


60 The idea that all literature has its origins in folk literature can be traced to Xu Jiarui. He presented in his book, *Zhonggu wenxue gailun* (An Introduction to Medieval Literature) in 1924 the theory that in Medieval China, folk literature was much more important than aristocratic literature. This view was received with enthusiasm by Hu Shi and many others, and incorporated in much theoretical writing of the 1920s and 1930s. See Hung, *Going to the People*, pp. 7-8.

61 Particularly appealing to leftists was the idea that folklore was collectively created and collectively consumed. It seems that this was later taken to prove that common people were prone to collective action, had homogeneous taste, and were anti-individualistic, all qualities that Mao Zedong, for example, cherished and needed for the credibility of his theories.

62 Chang-tai Hung claims, however, still in 1985 that the term *minjian wenxue* (folk literature) has never been defined by Chinese folklorists. Hung, *Going to the People*, p. 1.
come "vulgar literature" and folklore were treated synonymously, and the view survives even today, causing a certain terminological anarchy.

From a modern point of view, however, the problem with Zheng's ideas was that he did not bother about today's world. He asks for appreciation of folk culture because it digests the world into wonderful source material for the literati to work on. His view therefore accepts and perpetuates the hierarchies of traditional society, but it does of course remind the readers—the literati—of values other than their own. However, folk culture is not so important for what it is, but for what others can make it into. Zheng Zhenduo explains history. Therefore, the individualism of the modern man in modern popular culture cannot be accommodated within Zheng's theory, and therefore the theory could not explain the development current in his own time.

The reason his work became so influential must be that he expressed a generous appreciation of the common people's cultural capacities, an idea which has certainly gained support during the more than half century since its publication. Another reason for its popularity is of course, paradoxically, the very limitation of his idea: it was so much easier for his readers to regard with generosity the cultural products of those common people who were safely located in history.

Mao's Yan'an Line

The various leftist literary debates and particularly Qu Qiubai's ideas appear to have formed Mao Zedong's thoughts on how to develop culture. Mao came to express his views in his "Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua" (Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art) in 1942, which was to have an unreasonably strong influence on mainland Chinese cultural life for at least the next half century. These views were traditional elitist, Marxist, and May Fourth radical all at once.

Mao Zedong adopted Liang Qichao's idea that literature and art can serve the nation, and changed it into a necessity for literature to serve the cause of revolution, in other words, to serve the current political ideology:

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63 For the text of this talk, see, e.g., [Mao Zedong], Mao Zedong lun wenyi (Mao Zedong on Literature and Art) (Beijing 1992), pp. 34–68. For an annotated translation and a discussion, see Bonnie S. McDougall, Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan, 1980).
Comrades! I have invited you to this conference today for the purpose of exchanging opinions with you on the correct relationship [...] between work in literature and art and revolutionary work in general, to obtain the correct development of revolutionary literature and art and better assistance from them in our other revolutionary work, so that we may overthrow our national enemy and accomplish our task of national liberation.64

He also supported the idea that authors with the right ideological qualities will produce the perfect literary products, a thought construct that deftly hands over the responsibility for the state of things to the writers themselves, who from then on were made to strive for the unattainable salvation called correct thinking.

According to Mao, the common people were in a pitiful cultural state and therefore revolutionary intellectuals, who were necessarily on a higher level than the people, had to create cultural products that would raise the people's level. All that the people had was endless needs, which leaders and intellectuals had to meet. Cadres, on the other hand, were defined as having “higher” cultural needs than the masses.65 Mao also problematized at length the consequences of class affiliation for cultural production and consumption, but did it with no consideration to actual practice, and in an entirely prescriptive manner.

Unfortunately, Mao was much more rural than Qu Qiubai, and therefore could not develop Qu’s ideas on the importance of modern urban popular culture. This may be one reason why Mao talked very little about popular culture, and when he did, his ideas appear very conventional, old-fashioned and unsophisticated. He implied a dogmatic hostility toward the urban xiao shimin (petty bourgeoisie) stratum—as the only consumers of decadent urban popular culture,—and confessed to an elitist, hierarchic view of “elementary literature and art” as something needed by the “broader masses” (zui guangda qunzhong suo zui xian xuyao de chuji de wenyi).66

Mao lacked experience of urban life, and consequently acquired a negative bias toward urban popular culture. From 1942, his cultural policies were aimed at replacing and wiping out modern urban culture. Mao’s early contacts with urban life had been very brief: a year in Beijing, some

64 McDougall, Mao Zedong, p. 57.
65 Ibid., pp. 70 ff.
66 [Mao Zedong], Mao Zedong lun wenyi, pp. 51–52; McDougall, Mao Zedong, p. 72. For a comparison of Mao’s and Qu Qiubai’s views, see Pickowicz, Marxist Literary Thought in China, pp. 225–35.
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weeks in Shanghai. His stay in Beijing when he worked at Beijing University Library coincided with the early folklore movement. It is conceivable that his aversion toward modern popular culture stemmed from the ideas of this movement; on the other hand, his view of peasant culture definitely cannot be called idealizing. After all, even urban workers, who were the core of the "revolutionary masses," consumed the same kind of urban popular culture as the hateful xiao shimin did, but Mao totally ignores this fact. Perhaps it was for ideological reasons that he refused to see it: the main force of revolution just could not read "westernized" popular fiction!

Mao's subconscious attitudes came to have a disproportionate influence on Chinese cultural life: from 1949 onwards, the culture of the entire nation was given an increasingly rural character, visible, among other ways, in the fact that the role of literature in printed form was made weaker and weaker, while storytelling and ballad arts with propaganda contents were heavily subsidized. After 1949 and until around 1978, central cultural policies regulated the production and consumption of all literature in the People's Republic of China. These policies, although fluctuating somewhat, had one basic tendency: increasingly strict ideological and political requirements were imposed on all literary production, entirely in line with Mao's Yan'an talks. This led to an artificial situation where no clearly identifiable elite or popular culture existed. The development culminated during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) when authorship was in practice replaced by collective committee work, and the public was paid to consume the cultural products of the time—during working hours.

Whatever can be said about cultural revolutionary literature, it was certainly not elite literature. The politicized products of that period could perhaps best be likened to formulaic popular literature, were it not for the extremely radical Maoist ideology they had to reflect. On the other hand, this

68 An exception was film. Catering to the need to reach and educate the illiterate masses, it had an important role to play. Film had also been blessed by Stalin.
69 McDougall, Mao Zedong, pp. 38–41, elaborates on the influence of the "Talks."
71 See my book Laughable Propaganda: Modern Xiangsheng as Didactic Entertainment (Stockholm 1990), pp. 70–119. Although this study deals with comical dialogues, identical strategies were used in more "literary" production as well. Most writers consequently preferred silence and were replaced by amateurs and volunteers.
ideological ballast makes them resemble Christian popular fiction in the west.\textsuperscript{72}

PRC—a Backlash?

By the last years of Mao’s rule, the contemporary cultural discourse was cleansed of the dichotomy of the elite and the popular. Even the notions vanished from use. When Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978, the extreme political control over cultural matters was eased, and a gradual liberalization and commercialization of cultural production and consumption ensued. Suddenly the taste of the common people started to matter: the economic reforms had made profit not only possible but necessary, and the sheer numbers of ordinary readers and buyers became a decisive factor in the fiction business. At first everyone welcomed all the cultural products that suddenly became accessible: traditional, Hong Kong, Taiwan, foreign, old and new, popular, elite, whatever. But after only a decade or so, a trench had been dug and many Chinese intellectuals, by then well versed in modern western theory, expressed a deep contempt of popular fiction and popular culture.

A shock that agitated the Chinese literary world as nothing had done before was released around 1990 by Wang Shuo. Having written some police fiction pieces earlier, he became suddenly famous for some television series that turned out to be great hits. Utilising Beijing slang, humor and irony, he painted pictures of daily life on the margins of urban society among cynical young people who had not quite made it to respectable life, much less attained any revolutionary ideals. Unlike all PRC writers before him, Wang Shuo had no pretensions about being or becoming a “great writer” or writing “good literature.” Unlike all other writers from any type of social origin, he refused to identify with intellectuals, whom he apparently did not particularly admire. He spoke freely about his earlier, unsuccessful careers in the army, as a peddler, etc., and his lack of university education, defying the traditional wish to save face and estab-

\textsuperscript{72} In contrast to Mao, someone that understood urban culture very well was Jiang Qing, his wife. Perhaps it was her very understanding and experience of modern urban popular culture that led Mao to entrust her with running PRC culture during the cultural revolution. The political controversy over her person and role has so far made it impossible to reach an objective view of her eventual personal ideas on popular literature. However, she seems to have been closely guided by Mao’s Yan’an talks.
lish a "respectable" image. Writing successful popular literature, he believed that he would be able to make money for some time but that such success would not last for ever, so he was going to take advantage of the chance but also plan for other activities—thus he was displaying a concern for and calculating attitude towards money that had been practically taboo among literati ever since the May Fourth Movement. Even worse, he soon set up a company to take care of his copyrights and develop his business. On the other hand, he was not interested in stuffy Communist institutions such as the Writers' Union, usually every author's dream as it provided a regular stipend.

The literati were flabbergasted and the government had anxious reports written on the "phenomenon" of Wang Shuo. Wang Shuo illustrated in one flash an oddity of PRC culture: despite forty years of communist power and proletarian preferences, there were no real worker writers or farmer writers. As soon as someone was able to author a book, s/he was more than happy to abandon what one would think was his/her authentic identity, and join the literati. Mao’s definitions of these social groups’ cultural attributes must have acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Wang Shuo provided entrepreneurial urbanites with a cultural icon: successful, realistic, bound by neither traditional nor communist habits, dynamic and optimistic—and able to write. He made visible the cultural consumption of the popular reader: with his appearance it was as if xiao shimin and their culture were at once somewhat rehabilitated. This was certainly needed, as a rapid urbanization was progressing all over the country, and the government’s standard solution to surplus labor was to help people start small businesses, a policy which led to the growth of this group.

On the other hand, the massive disdain with which the literati treated Wang Shuo’s figure and his fiction showed more than clearly that the challenge he personified was timely: how modern actually were the intellectuals’ ideas? Unfortunately, Mao’s negative view of xiao shimin has remained officially sanctioned, hindering liberation from this anti-modern ideology (at least among conventional individuals), an ideology directed toward a group whose important contribution to society is no

longer questioned. This situation results sometimes in paradoxical, almost self-negating rhetorical somersaults. The following passage is from a preface to a collection of short stories, explaining the difference between the new term “philistine fiction (shijing xiaoshuo)” and an old one, “city people’s literature (shimin wenxue)” (cf. xiao shimin “petty bourgeoisie”):

“City people’s literature” is an historical concept. It is the literature which appeared during the feudal period and which arose to correspond to the needs of handicraftsmen and merchants [...]. “Philistine fiction” is different from these [...] the biggest difference is in ideology. “City people’s literature” does assail the feudal order, but is itself largely feudal. “Philistine fiction” arose after “May Fourth” and its authors are socialists, consciously or not too consciously. “Philistine fiction” is socialist literature. The thinking of the authors of “city people’s literature” is on the same level as the characters they describe [...]. The thinking of the authors of “philistine fiction” lies on a higher level. They survey city people from above, which means that they can see more distinctly, more profoundly. [...] There are no epics among “philistine fiction”; they all deal with the trifles of people in low positions. There are no “heroes” in “philistine fiction,” they all deal with extremely ordinary people. [...] The life of modern city people and their ideological consciousness show a certain continuity with those of townspeople in history. Their social status is not high, their economic power is limited, and they labor hard just to fill their basic needs. [...] these people belong to those with superficial thinking. They can only think of how to live (this is not easy for them); but they cannot think of why humans live (this is too profound for them). Their thinking cannot rise to the heights of philosophy. They are vulgar. [...] Their conduct is often ridiculous [...] City people are not a dynamic social stratum; they are sealed off and conservative. They lack risk-taking and exploring spirit; most of them have been “abjectly obedient citizens all their lives.”

According to this Maoist assessment, ordinary urbanites are bound to turn out poorly even as objects of portrayal!

At the same time, some other interesting developments can be noted from recent years. The position of early twentieth-century popular fiction, particularly of the Mandarin-Duck-and-Butterfly school, has been somewhat reappraised during the 1990s. It is also generally recognized today that writing popular fiction requires a special capacity, something that many

75 See, e.g., Yuan Jin, Zhongguo wenxue, pp. 188–202.
elite writers have experienced when trying to earn extra money by writing for popular journals.

Through the work of Chen Pingyuan at Peking University, the idea that the literati can legitimately be interested in trivia, such as martial arts fiction, has now become accepted, and has somewhat raised the status of martial arts fiction. In addition, the placement of the Hong Kong writer of martial arts fiction, Jin Yong (or Louis Cha), on an influential list of the best Chinese writers of the twentieth century has, in spite of the controversy, further corroborated the acceptance of popular literature.

These are practical victories, easily supported by today's wider readership and the positive official attitudes toward popular literature created by its economic potential, used to subsidize more serious publications. Among the literati, there is widespread ideological hesitation about how to view the entire phenomenon of popular culture/fiction, as the above solution offered by Communist ideology appears outdated. At the same time, the search for some type of folk expression in the spirit of early twentieth century predecessors continues to engage theoreticians such as Chen Sihe.

Discussion

The above sections describe a series of approaches to popular fiction or popular culture adopted by Chinese intellectuals during the twentieth century. This set of approaches illustrates a very gradual but significant development, through which a popular cultural form appears to evolve from an officially despised and prosecuted category to become a controversial but important market factor.

What is striking in this development is its gradual and moderate character: the progression of ideas consisted of small, rather unconspicuous steps with considerable adherence to traditional ideas. A popular genre which was not traditionally included in the literary canon could be given legitimacy only if it was found to comply with some traditional value. In the case of fiction, this principle was the interest of the nation, which was proclaimed with authority by Liang Qichao, while May Fourth modernist

76 Chen Pingyuan, Qiangu wenren xiakemeng (Eternal Literati Dream of Knights Errant) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1992).

77 See, e.g., his "Minjian de fuchen" ("Ups and Downs of the Popular"), Shanghai wenxue No. 1 (1994), pp. 68-80.
writers tried hard to put the idea into practice. Both cases represent a traditional elitist approach, where culture is expected to be produced by the elite for consumption by the common people.

A second step was the acceptance of the idea that the common people’s culture could be valuable in itself. This comprises a more radical view: the common people are happy to consume cultural products that they themselves have produced. Zheng Zhenduo’s view that the common people were the source of all literary forms seems in fact almost opportunistic, but its acceptance must have further corroborated the appreciation of the common people’s culture. On the other hand, it returns the agency for culturally valuable production to the elite. The Marxist heritage of the May Fourth radicals and Mao Zedong had apparently no positive effect on the acceptance or promotion of popular culture, including popular fiction. The common people were again passivized into the role of mere cultural consumers, while cultural production could only be accomplished under guidance from political cadres. Indirectly, however, the diminishing access to traditional cultural products during the Mao years of the PRC must have weakened the position of classical literature and prepared the way for anything new as soon as the politicized fiction of the pre-1978 period was replaced. The 1980s popular fiction boom broke the monopoly of elite opinion regarding popular culture, allowed the growing urban middle class to identify with this cultural form and experience the intoxication of power, when the sales figures alone for popular fiction proved enough to marginalize elite literature and command the attention of the authorities. This only aggravated elite critics, but in cultural matters, money is power, and, consequently, popular fiction took some shaky steps toward the literary canon.

From the point of view of modernization, we can see the above development of attitudes vis-à-vis popular culture as part of the history of reception of the egalitarian idea, how elite intellectuals have dealt with the idea of equality by systematically questioning, doubting and exploring its various tenets and practical consequences. This can be applied to China as well as to Europe, with the difference that Europe has a more definite, received interpretation of the result, which makes it harder for us to see any alternative picture. We, the European literati, like to describe our history in terms of pro-egalitarian, Enlightenment ideas as the only reasonable views that existed on this question and the only ones that any sensible people, particularly members of elites, would consider having. This received interpretation neglects the more conservative, elitist, anti-egalitarian views which
flourished in Europe; they have been comfortably written away in standard historiography, making Europeans appear all the more progressive, tolerant, and modern. This becomes conspicuous when we discuss political dissidence in non-western dictatorships with representatives of such countries. It gives Europeans a bias, a blind spot, which I think hampers our understanding of corresponding developments in other parts of the world, such as China, which have not experienced Enlightenment.

Let us conduct a thought experiment and try to see the matter from another angle: Consider how provoking the egalitarian idea must once have been for representatives of an elite in a society which for centuries had explained itself as consisting of a certain fixed set of social strata. A hundred years ago, the idea of the popular as something more than a lack of positive elite qualities was still new. When modern ideas were introduced in China, one of these was the egalitarian view that all humans have a similar basic value. Traceable to many thinkers of the past, this view met with much opposition in most parts of the world, but also support. The academic communities, certainly an elite in each society, went out of their way to try to invalidate the claims to equality by measuring the skulls, noses and ears of criminals, beggars, “wilds” and others whom people had a hard time seeing as their peers, in search of differences. When no significant physiological differences could be found, they turned to factors other than biological. Even if all humans had similar bodies, their cultures (that is: cultural accomplishments) and their groupings (that is: states) were obviously not equal, they seemed to say. Therefore, with the help of scholars, nation states and ethnic groups started “discovering” their national cultural histories and heritages—a process that is still going on in many parts of the world—and challenged each other to find the most ancient origins for their own particular culture, as if the oldest or richest culture would win a game. Social Darwinism, which was probably a western strategy developed for a similar reason, actually prescribed such activity as a competition. And yes, it happened that results were in fact faked, so important were they. The contest was often carried out within the fields of archaeology, linguistics, and folklore. Thus even folk culture became a focal area of national significance, and the existence of a national historical epic a crucial qualification for “excellence.”

When it was shown that each folk had an ancient and unique cultural tradition and could therefore be seen as equals, it still remained puzzling that individuals within the same nation could show such striking differences in accomplishment: how could they be equals? This legitimized social and behavioral sciences: the study of the behavior of individuals or groups could hopefully solve the question, and perhaps disprove the idea of equality in the end. (Symptomatically, perhaps, social and behavioral sciences were largely banned in Mao's China.) These studies put the focus on social strata and revealed that all of them, even the poorest urbanites, did have a culture of their own, a culture which was not just a lack of elite culture or a degenerate version of their traditional folk culture, but an intricate system that corresponded to their specific needs. This is where the study of popular culture and popular fiction fits in.—But why has it been so controversial?

I think we need to place popular culture/popular fiction not just within this sketchy "historical" framework, but also to focus on the elite vs. non-elite dichotomy as a struggle over influence in a modernizing society, in order to explain the controversial nature of popular culture. Popular culture has never needed any preachers, integrated as it is in the economic, material and conceptual world of its producers and consumers. The economic development during the past century has improved the living standards of a huge number of individuals and created in many countries a large middle class, wealthy enough to consume plenty of popular cultural products. This has meant that the traditionally more prominent elite culture, which disseminates elite interests through elite values, has gradually been marginalized, while various more popular cultural forms have taken over. It is the proponents of the elite culture (often symbiotic with so-called traditional culture) that have found their authority and legitimacy questioned, and who, consequently, have refused to accept the state of things and protested vehemently by vilifying popular culture/fiction. It is the Chinese case that in its more concentrated form can illustrate even European history, for the enlightenment of us all.

79 It is interesting to note that this conclusion coincides with the growth of international cooperation; we can see the forming of the League of Nations etc. as a way in which people in the world have taken the consequences of the stated lack of fundamental differences between peoples. The next step is the elimination of the nation as a significant unit—no wonder we are talking about globalization today.

Contextualizing the Odes: were the ancient Chinese “ontologically poor”?

Man and cosmos, according to common wisdom, are inextricably linked in early Chinese poetry and philosophy. Equipped with an “associative intellect” the ancient Chinese sought in Nature and natural phenomena—the changing of the seasons, the migration of birds and the stars—guidance for human action.¹ This is not an unwarranted claim. Treatises from no later than the third century BCE include elaborate schemes dictating how to eat, dress and act in proper accordance with the seasons.² The link between man and nature was, it seems, perceived as very real, immediate and concrete.

¹ Edward Shaughnessy, in The Composition of the “Zhouyi” (PhD diss., Stanford Univ., 1983), p. 103, links the Odes to the Zhou Changes: “[a]ll of these employed the xing-evocation so ubiquitous in the Shijing and so characteristic of the associative intellect of ancient China in general.” For the so called xing-evocation, see the section “The nature and function of the Odes in the fourth century BCE” below.

² See, for instance, the “Almanac” included in Mr. Lü’s Annals (Lüshi chunqiu 吕氏春秋) of 239 BCE. The “Ying tong” chapter of Mr. Lü’s Annals indeed describes the objects of the world as mutually corresponding: “Things of the same correlative category [lei 類] naturally attract one another; things of the same qi-ether 氣 naturally come together; tones that are similar answer [ying 應] each other.” For a translation of, and an introduction to, this book, see John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, The Annals of Lü Buwei (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000). Mr. Lü’s “Almanac” appears also as the “Yueh ling 月令” chapter of the Book of Rites (Liji 禮記). Cf. James Legge’s translation “The Yueh Ling” in Lü Chi: Book of Rites (Rpt.; New York: University Books [1885] 1967), vol. 1, pp. 249–310.


All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
All dates are BCE unless otherwise indicated.
And perhaps this did in fact have far-reaching, almost overwhelming consequences. Perhaps the very earliest forms of Chinese “thinking” were in fact rooted in correlations of human action with natural phenomena to such an extent that it would be altogether anachronistic to distinguish between poetic, mythological, historical, divinatory, or religious discourses. Perhaps, as indeed it has been claimed, what we today perceive as records of divination are in fact “songs”; perhaps the famed narration of the feats of the Sage Emperor Yu is not a historical chronicle but a mythical representation of the motions of heavenly bodies; perhaps the intriguing imagery we find in the Book of Odes is not metaphors or similes but literal accounts of cosmological correspondences between man and Nature actually believed to “be out there.”

So maybe Martin Heidegger was right to say that “[t]he metaphorical”—i.e. the linguistic and conceptual figure that explains this in terms of that—“obtains only within Metaphysics,” since Oriental thinking sees the connections between different things and phenomena but does not order them into hierarchies. And perhaps the standard sinological claim is true, that due to this fondness for correlation ancient Chinese thinking was predestined to stress propriety in human behaviour and action and the necessity to conform to the Way (Tao) of Nature, in contrast to the more abstract Platonic tradition which took a step back to ponder the being qua being. Perhaps, then, the ancient Chinese were ontologically poor.

Yet, by pointing to the sky and the scattered stars that lure human imagination to confer upon them common shapes and names, what is the bitter narrator of the catastrophic ode “Great East” doing if not mischievously throwing the grand cosmological tradition to the winds, suspending it?

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3 For the view that the Zhou Changes (Zhouyi, the earliest stratum of the Book of Changes, Yiijing) were songs, see Huang Yushun, 黃玉順, Yiijing guge kaoshi (Chengdu: Basishushe, 1995). Deborah Lynn Porter’s important study From Deluge to Discourse: Myth, History and the Generation of Chinese Fiction (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996) builds on the work of John Major and David Pankenier, and holds that the narrations of “the great inundations of floodwaters and Yu’s control of them represent a tradition based on the obvious changes in time in arrival of certain constellations on the eastern horizon,” p. 31. For a similar interpretation of some myths concerning the Yellow Emperor, see Edward L. Shaughnessy, “‘Qian’ and ‘Kun’ Hexagrams,” in Edward Shaughnessy, Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 209–10.

72 Martin Svensson Ekström

在南有箕
不可以簸扬

维北有斗
不可以挹酒浆

In the south there is the Winnowing Basket
it cannot be used to winnow

In the north there is the Ladle
it cannot be used to ladle wine or congee

As we shall see, the useless Winnowing Basket and the illusory Ladle are uniquely able to inform us about ancient Chinese poetics. The poet’s deconstruction of these natural but factitious images is part of a meta-poetics—a scattered theory of “literature”—that cannot but problematize facile descriptions of early Chinese poetry as emotional, “spontaneous” or “unmediated,” or as devoid of tropes and figures.


6 The Sinological commonplace of Chinese shī ("poetry, lyric") as spontaneous and “involuntary” is intimately linked to the Heideggerian idea of the absence of metaphoricity in the Chinese tradition. The Greek poieis derives from poiein ("make, fabricate") and so suggests that the Greek (or Western) poem is consciously fabricated by a poet (a “maker”) in full control of his raw material. By contrast there is no distance between a Chinese bard and the object of his making: the Chinese shī “is the writer” (Stephen Owen, Readings in Chinese Literary Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, UP, 1987), p. 27. Western poieis is thus characterized by distance and artifice, hence its propensity for calculated figures of speech such as metaphor and allegory. By contrast Chinese shī is conceived as warm, immediate and anti-metaphorical. For a critique of this understanding of shi, see my "A Second Look at the Great Preface on the Way to a New Understanding of Han Dynasty Poetics," Chinese Literature, Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR) 21 (1999), pp. 1–33.
My ambition, as outlined in greater detail below, is not only to explain the function and character of *shi* (song, poem, ode, *The Odes*) in fourth century China as spelled out by historical and philosophical narratives of that time. Nor will I merely perform a close reading of certain *Odes* in search of an implicit poetics. I will go one step further and pinpoint a peculiar "literariness" or "poeticness" that appears in certain *Odes* but is absent from contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous discourses of high cultural status—most notable the bronze inscriptions, the *Classic of Documents*, and the *Classic of Changes*—which may have influenced, or been influenced by, the *Odes*. My definition of the true poetic text as "difficult," characterized by moments of suspension and discontinuities that call out for revision and re-reading, is drawn from the Russian Formalists and their followers.7

I will show that in these difficult poems form and content are inseparably interlaced, and that they theorize, metapoetically, their own figurality and mode of being. The historical and philosophical discourses from which the *echt* literature of the *Shijing* sublates itself and emerges as "a lucky bastard" do not—in my opinion—have the gravity, the density or the pull that mark a truly poetic text. I hope to demonstrate the validity of this assertion in the course of my argument below.

Methodologically, the present project aims to be concretely text-centered. One cannot summarize poetics, nor make a detour around it or take a shortcut to it. Instead one must "go through" it, experience it. Only through close readings of the primary materials can the student of literature theorize about their meaning, their rhetorical status, and their intertextuality; only thus can he or she hope to say anything original about texts seemingly worn threadbare by more than two millennia of analysis.

But let us now contextualize.

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The Odes as "literature" and as a Confucian Classic

Shijing ("The Classic of Odes") is the earliest anthology of verse in the Chinese tradition. Originally known simply as the Shi ("the Odes"), the collection contains 305 pieces traditionally considered to have been composed between the tenth and sixth centuries BCE. Problems immediately arise if we try to be more specific, or corroborate the traditional dates, and we should acknowledge rather than obfuscate the gaps in our knowledge. When, where and by whom were these texts originally composed? For what reasons and purposes? Other questions are difficult but not impossible to answer. When and where do we find the first references to the Odes as a complete corpus? Through which processes and under what historical circumstances did the Odes—so vibrant, erotic and passionate—become one of the five Confucian Classics and thus a major vehicle for trite Confucian ethics? How can a present-day theorist best describe these verses: as "literature" qua independent aesthetic artifacts and expressions of personal experience, as historical records, or as religious or mythological documents? And—in the present context perhaps the most important question—what do the Odes themselves tell us about their provenance, status and rhetorical modality as literary texts in fourth century China, the so-called Warring States period?

I will address these questions through close readings of a number of Odes and of some philosophical, historiographical and commentarial texts of a Confucian persuasion from the fourth to second centuries in which the Odes are theorized, quoted or discussed. Particular attention will be given to the following works:

1. The historiographical chronicle Mr. Zuo’s Commentary (Zuozhuan 左傳; fourth century) which fleshes out the laconic Spring and Autumn (Chun qiu 春秋), an earlier chronicle that relates in anorectic language the main events in Confucius’ home state Lu 魯 between 722 and 491.

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8 311 titles are preserved but only 305 actual poems.
9 It is traditionally supposed that the oldest parts of the Classic date from about 1000 and the latest stratum from the sixth century, but some recent scholarship claims that the Odes were compiled and "mostly written" from the middle of the fifth century to the fourth century. The fact of the matter is that we can neither refute nor substantiate such a claim. It is obvious, however, that by the time of Mr. Zuo’s Commentary (fourth century) the Odes are a corpus of verse. Cf. Bruce and Taeko Brooks, The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), p. 9.
10 The others are the Book of Documents (Shujing), the Book of Changes (Yijing), the Rites (Li) and the Spring-and-Autumn (Chunqiu). For a comprehensive introduction to the history of Chinese literature, see Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, Geschichte der chinesischen Literatur: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart, 2nd ed. (München: C. H. Beck, 1999).
2. The collected sayings of Confucius, the Analects (Lunyu 論語; fourth century).\(^\text{12}\)

3. Mr. Lü's Annals (Lüshi chunqiu 呂氏春秋), a heterogeneous collection of philosophical treatises compiled in the state of Qin 秦 in 239.\(^\text{13}\)

4. The philologico–exegetical work on the Odes, the “Mao Commentary” (“Maozhuan 毛傳,” second century).\(^\text{14}\)

5. The historico–exegetical work on the Odes, the “Mao Preface” (“Maoshi xiaoxu 毛詩小序,” second century).\(^\text{15}\)

6. The Zhou Changes (Zhouyi 周易), supposedly the earliest part of the Classic of Changes (Yijing 易經) a divination manual of an early but uncertain date.\(^\text{16}\)

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\(^{11}\) The twelve sections of Mr. Zuo's Commentary are named after the reigns of the twelve dukes who governed the state of Lu 魯, Confucius' home state, 722–481. These sections are then subdivided chronologically, e.g., "Duke Xi, year 24." Following convention I thus give for each quotation from the Commentary the ruler's name and the year from which my quotation is drawn. I also refer to the English translation by James Legge, The Chun Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen, vol. 5 of The Chinese Classics: With a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes (Rpt. Taipei: SMC Publishing, [1871] 1992). In a recent study, Yuri Pines demonstrates convincingly that the Commentary was "compiled before the second quarter of the fourth century... [and] did not undergo substantial changes after this date." Yuri Pines, Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period 722–453 B.C.E. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002). Bernhard Karlgren's classic study is less precise but points in the same direction. "The Early History of the Chou Li and Tso Chuan Texts," Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, vol. 3 (1931), pp. 57–59 and passim.


\(^{14}\) The "Mao Commentary" has not been translated in full, although it is partly translated or paraphrased in Karlgren, Glosses and in Legge, The She King.

\(^{15}\) The "Mao Preface" was probably written in the late second century BCE but the exact date is disputed. Zhu Ziqing's pioneer Shi yan zhi bian (Rpt; Taipei: Kaiming, [1947] 1982) holds that the "Mao Preface" precedes the "Mao Commentary" (Shi yan zhi bian, p. 58). For the opposite position, see Lee Kar-shui, 李家樹 Shijing di lishi gong an (Taipei: Da'an, 1990), p. 21. For a monograph on the poetics of the so-called "Greater Preface," see Hermann-Joseph Röllicke, Die Führte des Herzens: Die Lehre vom Herzensbestreben (zhi) im Grossen Vorwort zum Shijing (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1992).

The Preface is translated by Legge: The She King, pp. 36–81.

\(^{16}\) There are numerous translations of the Yijing (also known as I-ching). I prefer the bare rendition in Richard Kunst, The Original Yijing: A Text, Phonetic Transcription, Translation, and Indexes, with Sample Glosses (PhD diss., UC Berkeley, 1985)
Shi according to Mr. Zuo, Mr. Lü, and Confucius’ “allegorical imperative”

Let us begin with an elementary observation. The Chinese character *shi* 詩 is habitually translated as “poetry” but whereas the Western concept derives from the Greek *poiein* (“to make, fabricate”) and thus suggests that poetic discourse is consciously fabricated and by implication cool, intellectual and distanced, the sinological consensus is that *shi* refers to a spontaneous outburst of emotions—and thus is warm, sensuous and immediate.¹⁷ This claim, moreover, feeds into the Heideggerian notion of “the metaphorical” as a typically metaphysical and Occidental phenomenon, and to the concomitant assumption that there is a particular Chinese way of thinking which immediately relates things instead of coolly establishing the ontological hierarchies necessary for metaphorical thinking. But is this clear-cut distinction between *poieis* and *shi* accurate or, for that matter, relevant? In the following I shall hint at the changes in the concepts of *shi* that took place over the centuries. Like *poieis*, *shi* was not a static concept.

We should begin by noting that the character *shi* 詩 occurs only three times in the *Shi* corpus, always with reference to ceremonial recitations accompanied by music. “Curving Slope” (“Quan e,” ode 252) praises a nobleman who has gone to court to present his “songs,” his “tones” and his *shi*. The translation of *shi* as “ode”—implying both orality and music—is thus fitting. Furthermore, in “Earl of the Alley” (“Xiang bo,” ode 200) *shi* is described as a pure and honest discourse among slanderers. “Majestic and Towering” (“Song gao,” ode 259) distinguishes between “recitation” (*song* 誦), *shi* and “air” (*feng* 風), and in this context *shi* probably refers to the content of the ode, whereas *song* refers to the vocal recitation, and *feng* to the musical performance thereof. In the *Odes*, therefore, *shi* would seem to denote content rather than poetic form or embellishment. *Shi* also seems to denote a discourse with high moral pretensions.

If *shi* is not a particularly well-defined or prevalent concept in the *Odes* themselves, by the second century it has most definitely become the standard term for “poem” or poetic composition. The Confucian “Mao Preface” explains each and every *ode* as a proper response to a particular historical situation, and on more than forty occasions the “Preface” says that “this poem 是詩” was “made” (*zuo* 作 or *wei* 為) or “recited” (*fu* 賦) in order to remonstrate with an erring lord or to effectuate a change in government.

¹⁷ Cf. note 6 above.
For our present purposes it should be emphasized that although shi in the “Preface” is always bound to a certain historical context, the poems are never described as “spontaneous” outbursts of emotions but, rather, as a means of changing the prevailing situation. That the “Preface” also explicitly defines shi as “made” (zuo ätze) clearly indicates that the Odes—or should we say the Poems—were thought to have been consciously composed or fabricated, thus bearing some resemblance to the Greek poiēsis. We shall see presently how the Odes, on the interpretation advanced by the “Preface” and its precursors, work by means of innuendo, double entendre and allegoresis. It has been frequently and correctly remarked that the “Preface” and the subsequent tradition of Confucian, moralizing interpretations of the Odes overdid their case by interpreting all three hundred and five pieces allegorically. Nonetheless, the Confucian allegoresis of the second century was not only anticipated by certain Odes but also by Mr. Zuo’s Commentary and the Analects. Both these works can with some confidence be dated to the fourth century, and both describe the Odes as a means of courteous communication. One memorable passage in the Analects depicts Confucius passing his son in the courtyard. The exchange between père et fils Kong is neither long nor particularly tender. Confucius asks his son if he has studied the Odes. When the son replies in the negative Confucius curtly says that “you then lack the means with which to speak.”

Elsewhere, Confucius says that the Odes bring man knowledge about the “names of birds, beasts, plants and trees.” Conversely, not knowing the Odes severely diminishes man’s view of the world: it is “as though he stood facing a wall.” That Confucius so closely associated the Odes with

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18 See my discussion in “A Second Look.”
21 Analects, 17:9.
22 Ibid., 17:10.
knowledge, wisdom and morality explains why in the philosophical discourses of Mozi, Mencius and Xunzi an *ode* is often quoted at the end of an argumentation to exemplify and authenticate the claim being made.\(^{23}\) In *Mr. Zuo’s Commentary* the *Odes* are called a “storehouse of righteousness,” and it is indeed very much as a repository of sagely insights that the *Odes* appear in these philosophical texts.\(^{24}\)

But perhaps Confucius’ most influential remark is that “one phrase captures the essence of the *Odes*: ‘in thinking [they] do not digress 思無邪.’”\(^{25}\) This statement may seem odd when for instance an overtly erotic poem such as “I Lift My Skirt” (“Qian shang,” *ode* 87) is considered, but for the allegorizing interpreters of the second century Confucius’ remark meant that the *Odes* were always and everywhere morally unflawed. And, indeed, what *could* a chaste Confucian do with tales of explicit lust and hopeless despair but (mis-)read them allegorically? Consequently, from Confucius onwards, if an ode speaks of carnal love on a literal level there *must* be a moralizing message hidden at another level, and it is the interpreter’s task to find it. Let us call this Confucius’ “allegorical imperative.”\(^{26}\)

Confucius’ imperative may account for the impulse to transform amorous, and therefore potentially scandalous or even meaningless, poems into historical documents and allegories of moral perfection. But it is *Mr. Zuo’s Commentary* that explains Confucius’ assertion that “without the *Odes* you cannot speak.” In the *Commentary*, the *Odes* function as a vehicle for decorous and ritualized communication. At international gather-

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23 The *Odes* occasionally also have this function in *Mr. Zuo’s Commentary*, as in Duke Cheng, year 7; Legge, *The Tso Chuen*, p. 363 (Legge here excludes the phrase “It is this situation that this ode speaks of”).


25 Ironically, Confucius is here (mis-)quoting “Jiong” (*騄* ode 297). The character that Confucius renders “thinking” is a particle and the whole line refers to horses running without straying.

26 I use “allegory” here in the etymological sense of “speaking otherwise.” Although allegory and allegoresis are appropriate terms for many Confucian interpretations of the *Odes* an “appropriated reading” such as Boyou’s quotation of “Quails in Pairs” is, as I argue below, not allegorical.
ings during the tempestuous Warring States Period, rather than express their sentiments and wishes in plain speech the diplomats in *Mr. Zuo’s Commentary* would recite (fu 賦) the *Odes* out of context in ways that clearly anticipate the figurative and historicizing interpretations of the second century. As we shall see below, this *quotability* is characteristic of the interpretation and use of the *Odes* in both *Mr. Zuo’s Commentary* and *Mr. Lü’s Annals*. 

At this juncture, and before proceeding, we should make three additional remarks. I must reiterate that we cannot determine the provenance of the *Odes*. Did they originate as songs gathered from the common people and shamans, or were they composed by scribes at the courts of the various states or, again, by various nobles of the Warring States? The question of origins is here not so much a question of genealogy as a matter of asking how the ancient Chinese regarded the relationship between what we may call the “text itself” and the “farfetched” *use* it was put to when publicly recited. From both *Mr. Zuo’s Commentary* and *Mr. Lü’s Annals* we may infer that the tension between an ode as an integral entity and the same piece when extracted and applied to another context was indeed appreciated. As a case in point, Mr. Zuo reports that when a nobleman named Lupu Gui in 545 was chided for marrying a woman of his own clan he replied “Why should I avoid my own clan? When I recite [fu] the *Odes* I break off a stanza [and quote it out of context], thus taking what I want therefrom. Why should I acknowledge the [taboo against marrying my own] clan?” Lupu Gui’s conspicuous analogy with incestuous marriages corroborates the belief that the poetry recital in vogue in the Warring States was perceived as a violation of the thematic integrity of the *Odes*. In other words, when someone recited the *Odes* out of context in order to “grasp [another] meaning, *qu yi*” he knew that this new meaning was secondary, derivative, to wit parasitic, false, fictional.

Secondly, the passage in *Mr. Zuo’s Commentary* that describes a certain Ji Zha enjoying a musical performance of the *Odes* (a passage to which I shall return below) attests that the corpus referred to as the *Shi* was already in 544 largely identical with the extant version of the *Classic of Odes*. The *Odes* as performed for Ji Zha were already organized into the familiar tri-

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27 Zeng Qinliang, *Zuozhuan yinshi, fushizhishijiao yanjiu* (Taipei: Wenjin, 1993) and Zhang Suqing, *Zuozhuan chengshi yanjiu* (Taiwan: Taiwan daxue, 1991) include both insightful discussions of the recitation of *Odes* in the *Commentary* and helpful charts of the poems recited.

partite division of “Feng 風,” “Ya 雅” and “Song 頌,” and the “Feng” section was already divided into the present subdivisions.

Thirdly, Mr. Zuo tells us that in 621 “Renhao, Earl of Qin, died. He buried Ziche’s three sons Yanxi, Zhongxing, Xianhu alive with him. These three were Qin’s finest. The Men of the State were moanful and for this reason presented [to the court] (fu 賦) ‘Yellow Bird.’ ”

“Yellow Bird” (“Huang niao”) is ode 131 in the present version of Shi-jing, and stands out in the otherwise largely anonymous collection by detailing a particular historical event:

Small, small are the yellow birds
settling in the jelube-tree
Who follows Duke Mu?
Ziche’s son Yanxi
Now this Yanxi
is like a hundred men
Facing his tomb
shaking, shaking was his trembling
That blue heaven
destroys our fine men
Could he be replaced
by other men, it would have to be one hundred

In Mr. Zuo’s account, when the “Men of Qin” presented (fu) “Yellow Bird” they did not recite an already existing ode but a piece that had clearly been written in response to a unique event. By describing “Huang niao” thus, Mr. Zuo directly anticipates the historico-hermeneutic style of the “Mao Preface.” Finally, by relating “Huang niao” to the catastrophic event in 621 the Commentary provides a terminus post quem for the completion of the Shi corpus. In other words, if we accept Mr. Zuo’s account then in 621 the Odes were still not a fixed corpus.

The nature and function of the Odes in the fourth century BCE

To further exemplify the function of the Odes in the fourth and third centuries, I will now comment upon a few representative Odes, both in their own right as supposedly independent aesthetic objects, and as they appear in Mr. Zuo’s Commentary in the fourth century and in the “Mao Preface” in the second century.

29 Duke Wen, year 6; Legge, The Tso Chuen, p. 244.
30 Not surprisingly, the “Mao Preface” to “Huang niao” is a direct paraphrase of the Zuo Commentary passage. Cf. Legge, The She King, p. 58.
Let us consider one of the shortest and most inconspicuous odes, “The River is Broad” ("He guang" ode 61):

| 誰謂河廣 | Who says the Yellow River is broad? |
| 一苇杭之 | I cross it on a reed |
| 誰謂宋遠 | Who says Song is faraway? |
| 賦予望之 | I see it standing on my toes |
| 誰謂河廣 | Who says the Yellow River is broad? |
| 僅不容刀 | It cannot accommodate a canoe |
| 誰謂宋遠 | Who says Song is faraway? |
| 僅不樂朝 | I'll be there before dawn |

The poem may be simple but it is not simplistic. The bonds between relatives, friends or lovers, this ode tells us, defy the greatest obstacles and the longest distances, separation and longing being common themes in the Odes. That which by definition is broad and distant—the Yellow River and the state of Song—is described as its very opposite.

With reference to Nicholas Wolterstorff’s account of presentational discourse as “presenting, ... offering for consideration, certain states of affairs—for us to reflect on, to ponder over, to conduct strandwise extrapolation on [last italics mine],” 31 we may say that “The River is Broad” is a carefully formed expression of a personal experience, enjoyed a high cultural status, and was seemingly “given over” to the reader for his or her enjoyment or “extrapolation.” 32 Yet, this would be somewhat anachronistic and skewed. It is hard to see how this poem could have been incorporated into the Classic of Odes were it not for the insistence of the Confucian tradition that it was written by the highborn mother of Duke Xiang of Song, who upon her return to the state of Wei longed “ceaselessly” (bu zhi) for her son, implying that by writing the ode she put an end to such unhealthy longing. 33 That the author was allegedly an aristocrat thus ensures the “high style” of the poem, gives it its high cultural value and so merits its incorporation into the Classic. In other words, it is not so much the theme or the form of the poem—its rhymes, or the employment of rhetorical questions, paradoxes and hyperbole—that makes it valuable, as the fact that it is springs from royalty.

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32 Cf. Anders Pettersson’s discussion, in the introduction to this volume, of the modern Western notion of literature.
33 Following the interpretation in the “Mao Preface.”
Moreover, according to the Confucian commentator the poem was written not for a reader but to give expression to the author’s emotions and so provide psychological relief.\(^{34}\)

Let us compare “The River is Broad” with “Quails in Pairs” (ode 49), another short and seemingly uncomplicated ode which could also be read as a straightforward expression of one person’s particular experience.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{鴳之奔奔} & \quad \text{The quails fly in pairs} \\
\text{鵲之彌彌} & \quad \text{The magpies fly in twos} \\
\text{人之無良} & \quad \text{A person who is no good} \\
\text{我以為兄} & \quad \text{I [must] consider a brother}
\end{align*}
\]

This poem employs the imagistic construction so typical of the *Odes* and which they share with the *Zhou Changes*, namely the juxtaposition of natural imagery (lines 1–2) and human action (lines 3–4). The traditional interpretation is suggested by the *Odes* themselves and takes the natural imagery as a description of the situation that obtains in the realm of humans.\(^{35}\) In this case, however, the analogy between Nature and Man is negative, or ironic, for the chaste quails and magpies live in pairs in obvious opposition to the promiscuous Xuan Qiang of the state of Yong whom this ode chides, according to the “Mao Preface.” As in ode 61 above, the situation is a paradoxical one, and doubly so. Not only do the birds stand in contrast to the human situation, but the person whom the author considers “an elder brother” (兄 xiong) is in fact a bad person.

The disharmony between nature and man is a matter of some importance. In anticipation of the second part of this article let me for the moment resume the discussion about correlative thinking that I instigated above in connection with “The Great East” (ode 203). What rules must poetic “associations” of Nature and Man obey within a strictly correlative system? Pauline Yu, the author of the most far-reaching study of Chinese cosmological poetics to date, claims that early “Chinese thought conceives of the universe as a spontaneous self-generating organism in which all phenomena exist in orderly, mutually implicating, correlative harmonies.”\(^{36}\)

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34 This is one of the few instances where the “Mao Preface” actually confirms the so-called stimulus-response poetics advanced by Pauline Yu. For a sophisticated discussion about the linguistics of emotion in the *Odes*, see Ulrike Middendorf, “The Making of Emotive Language: Expressions of Anxiety in the *Classic of Poetry,*” *Ming-Qing yanjiu* (2001), and “Ecstasis, Recession, Pain: Images of Suffering in the *Classic of Poetry*” (manuscript 2004).

35 See my analysis of “Zhen lu 振鶩,” ode 278, in section “A first genealogy: the mantic text” below.

36 Yu, *The Reading of Imagery*, p. 33
But why does such a system exclude metaphoricity (as Heidegger also implied) and why does it necessarily describe poetic discourse as spontaneous and non-creative? Yu answers that “the connections between subject and object or among objects, which the West has by and large credited to the creative ingenuity of the poet, are viewed in the Chinese tradition as already pre-established.” Consequently, if the “connections,” “associations” or correlations between Nature and Man were indeed conceived of as already pre-established then early Chinese poetics would “naturally” consider the composer of odes not a creator but an editor of imagistic correlations always already in existence. Metaphor simply does not exist there since language is always and everywhere a secondary and literal description of pre-existing correlations.

Another inevitable consequence would be, to paraphrase Ferdinand de Saussure, that within a strictly correlative system there can exist only positive relations. Hence the surprise when images of harmonious and chaste birds are paired, not with descriptions of harmonious and chaste men, but with human recklessness and promiscuity. Hence also the amazement when Nature makes a specious winnowing basket and a ladle appear in the firmament, as described by the cynical poet of the “Great East.” An imagistic mismatch where natural images contrast, or stand in an ironic relationship, to human action thus deviates from the correlative scheme, and I shall define the ironical use of natural imagery as a break in aesthetics between the Classic of Changes and the Odes, between the mantic text and the poetic-semiotic text.

Just as was the case with ode 61, “Quails in Pairs” is explained by the

38 Cf. Saussy’s discussion of the negative similes (e.g., “My heart is not a mat / you cannot roll it up”) used in “White Boat” (“Bo zhou,” ode 26). Problem of a Chinese Aesthetics, pp. 133–36.
“Mao Preface” as an expression of an individual’s experience and, moreover, as a poem setting forth its author’s complaint to the public. The function (if not the content) of the poem is explained quite differently, however, when it appears in a passage in Mr. Zuo’s Commentary. In 546 the Earl of Zheng gave a banquet in honour of his guest Zhao Meng of the state of Jin 春秋. Zhao Meng asked the congregated dignitaries each to “present” (賦 fu) an Ode “from which I may observe [觀 guan] your intentions [志 zhi].” A nobleman named Boyou thereupon recited “Quails in Pairs” to which Zhao abruptly replied “Words of the bedroom ought not to go beyond the threshold, and certainly not be spread across the country.” After the banquet, Zhao commented that “the Odes are used to express intent [詩以言志]. [Boyou’s] intent was to slander his superior and the Duke will resent him. To think that such behaviour is proper for a guest: could such a man last long?”

This example is informative. Like Duke Wei’s mother in ode 49 and the unnamed author of “Quails in Pairs,” Boyou expresses his personal opinion to an audience but with the obvious difference of using the ode as a persona, a mask. If the “Mao Preface” contextualizes the Odes by identifying the author of each piece and explaining the particular historical situation that spurred the author to poetic expression, the Odes in Mr. Zuo’s Commentary constitute rather a depersonalized communal storehouse of quotations with which one may converse politely and in accordance with aristocratic etiquette. According to the “Mao Preface” an ode is unique and private, whereas in Zuo’s Commentary it is quotable, adaptable and endlessly repeatable. And although the second century “Mao Preface” relies on the interpretative techniques established by Mr. Zuo’s Commentary the eminent quotability of the Odes has disappeared. The word shi (詩 ‘poetry,’ ‘song,’ ‘ode’) in Mr. Zuo’s formula shi yi yan zhi should therefore be translated not as “poetry is used to express intent” but rather in the more specific sense as “the Odes are used to express intent.”

In anticipation of our reading of “I Lift My Skirt” below, we should note that despite the metaphorical undertone of the images of the quails and magpies, “Quails in Pairs” is not allegorized by Boyou. That is, Boyou may appropriate another person’s words but on no occasion do these word deviate from their primary sense—the difference between a literal or pri-

40 Duke Xiang, year 27; Legge, The Tso Chuen, p. 533.
41 Duke Xiang, year 27; Legge, The Tso Chuen, p. 534.
42 Cf. “Yellow Bird,” which, according to the explanation given in the Zuo Commentary, is obviously “presented” or composed as a personal statement.
mary meaning, and a secondary and allegorical one does not come into play here. In Boyou’s mouth, “Quails in Pairs” is not an “extended metaphor.”

That Zhao Meng wishes to “observe” (觀 guan) the other guests’ intentions—their political agenda, in modern parlance—also warrants our attention. First, the term guan designates an objective, proto-scientific “observation” and interpretation of facts, such as the diviner’s observations of heavenly bodies as portents (as in the Classic of Changes). In the dynamic dialectics of presentations of Odes, then, guan is the reader’s/listener’s hermeneutic response to a recitation (fu): one person uses the Odes as a code to express his “intention” while the other person decodes that message through accurate “observation.”

Moreover, guan may also refer to the observation/decoding of the music with which the Odes were (sometimes) performed. An illuminating passage in Mr. Zuo’s Commentary records that during a visit to the state of Lu in 544, Ji Zha季札 of Wu 吳 requested that he be allowed to “observe the music of Zhou 觀於周樂” upon which the lord of Lu had his musicians sing (歌 ge not 服 fu 賦) the entire corpus of Odes.44 Ji Zha listened attentively and from the music alone drew conclusions about the mores of the states from which it originated. For instance, hearing the Odes from the state of Zheng 鄭 Ji Zha commented “Beautiful indeed! But Zheng was too fussy about details, and their people could not tolerate that.”

Most obviously, this passage demonstrates that the Odes were at least on occasion accompanied by music and that the specifically musical aspects of the Odes were conceived as being “observable” symptoms of the moral standards of their place of origin. But it is important for our purposes to grasp that it is precisely this that separates the musical aspect of the Odes from their function as fu-presentations, or coded messages. As music the Odes are transparent, non-manipulatable and reveal the corruption or virtue of their makers like a Freudian slip reveals the innermost secret of the neurotic. By contrast, when a person recites the Odes to “express his intentions” (言志 yan zhi), he is in full control both of himself and the poems.

43 Following Quintilian, Institutio oratoria, 9.2.46 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1920), and Heinrich Lausberg, Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik, §895.
44 The Odes are then performed according to the divisions of the present recension. This constitutes a most important piece of evidence that the Odes indeed existed as a corpus by the time of the conception of Mr. Zuo’s Commentary in (at the very latest) 300.
that serve both to veil and disclose, whereas music presents him "warts and all."\textsuperscript{46} Of equal importance for our understanding of "literature" in fourth century China is the relative scarcity of examples of such "observations" of odes \textit{qua} music—even the Confucian \textit{Analects} usually stress the function of the \textit{Odes} as means of communication.

That the \textit{Odes} functioned as a means of ritual communication is thus obvious from the descriptions in Mr. Zuo’s Commentary. A few \textit{Odes} in themselves bear witness to this particular "poetic function." Let us therefore conclude this part by returning to the \textit{Odes}. In the final stanza of "High South Mount" ("Jie nan shan," ode 191) the narrator himself suddenly appears and presents his aim:

\begin{enumerate}
\item I, Jia Fu, made this recitation …
\item to change your heart through these words
\item to make you protect and cultivate the ten thousand city-states.
\end{enumerate}

According to the "Mao Preface," the "Mao Commentary," and to what this lengthy poem itself reveals about the situation in which it was vocalized, its narrator is a noble of the declining Zhou Dynasty addressing the Grand Master Yin of Zhou, exhorting him, and King You幽, to lead a virtuous life that the populace may emulate.\textsuperscript{47} In the context of the examples drawn from Mr. Zuo’s Commentary above, "High South Mount" is a remarkable poem since it is self-explanatory and self-contextualizing. It is a poem characterized by a strong authorial presence. It is one person’s reaction to a particular historical situation in a poem directed to a particular audience in properly ritualized—i.e. metaphorical—language.

Since I will devote a fair amount of the remaining part of this article to questions of literary form, let us pay attention to how this admonition is carried out and consider the two lines that open the poem:

\begin{quote}
High and steep is South Mount
With its stones piled high.
\end{quote}

A remonstration in ten stanzas directed to one of the most powerful men of the ruling dynasty would not begin with a literal—and therefore, in this context, nonsensical—description of a pile of stones. Instead, and most probably as an accurate reconstruction of the author’s intention, Mao interprets the majestic mountain as a metaphor (later called \textit{xing}) of the grand

\textsuperscript{46} And, indeed, the above example seems to suggest that Boyou revealed more than he intended.

\textsuperscript{47} "Mao Preface"; James Legge, "The Little Preface," \textit{The She King}, pp. 67, 310.
Master Yin. Thus, just like the *fushi* practice, the rhetoric of Jia Fu involves metaphoricity and analogy.

**A taste of Confucian allegoresis: “I Lift My Skirt” (ode 87)**

Inscribed in the *Classic of Odes* is a tendency to justify the usurpation of power by the Zhou Dynasty (1100–221) from the previous Shang Dynasty in 1100, and an entire cycle of ten odes (235–244) praises the Zhou King Wen 文王 and the foundation of the Zhou. Moreover, several odes (e.g. “Great East,” “Mighty South Mount” and ode 264, “Zhan yang”) describe the demise of the Zhou and are articulated from the a-historic and catastrophic “now” of the survivor of a disaster: “no one before me/ no one after me 不自我先，不自我後.”

Apart from the folksy songs and the sacrificial hymns, the *Odes* cover a wide range of topics, from the farmer’s almanac in “The Seventh Month” (“Qi yue,” ode 154), to the mythological account of the origins of the Chinese race in “Birth of the People” (“Sheng min,” 245), and the minister’s remonstration in “Mighty South Mount,” as discussed above.

I shall now extend my introduction to the *Odes* by discussing “I Lift My Skirt” (“Qian shang,” ode 87), a poem that at first sight may appear to be a simple folk song but which on a re-reading is revealed as a “difficult” text torn apart by a radical ambiguity. Not only will this discussion serve as a guide to the “world” of the *Odes* and to the intertextual, polyphonic dialogue between a cluster of thematically related poems; it will also provide a further demonstration of how the *Odes* were interpreted and (ab)used in the “Mao Preface” and in the collection of philosophical essays called *Mr. Lü’s Annals*. In particular I hope to show how one interpretation is adopted and advanced by Mao’s “Preface” and another, fundamentally different

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48 Cf. “First Month” (“Zheng yue,” ode 192); “Gazing Upward” (“Zhan ang,” ode 264)

49 For general overviews of the *Odes* I recommend a cautious reading of Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001; notes posted on the Internet, www.yale.edu/yup/nylan), chap. 2, and of Schmidt-Glintzer’s monumental *Geschichte der chinesischen Literatur*, chap. 2. Martin Kern and Edward L. Shaughnessy have recently done important work on the performative function of the *Odes*. The latter scholar holds that many of the supposedly older *Odes* were “liturgical prayers ... [with] no function or meaning apart from that ritual context” (*Before Confucius*, p. 165). In a similar manner, Martin Kern, “*Shi jing* Songs as Performance Texts: A Case Study of ‘Chu ci’ (Thorny Caltrop),” *Early China* 25 (2000), analyses ode 209.

50 I have analyzed ode 87 from a different perspective and in a different context in my “Inscription and Re-reading—Re-reading the Inscribed (A Figure in the Chinese Philosophical Text),” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, vol. 74 ([2002] 2004), pp. 125–32.
one, by Mr. Lü, while in fact it is the unresolvable ambiguity itself that seduces the reader, the metapoetic and truly masochistic subject.

**The sublime object of masochistic desire—the borderline girl and the borderline poem**

The male narrator of the *Odes* is obsessed with a particular type of young women—alluring, elusive and impenetrable. Thus the young man in “Crying Osprey” (“Guan ju,” ode 1) loses sleep over, and pines for, a girl he cannot reach and who is metaphorically described as an osprey isolated on an islet in a river. Depicted in “Broad is the Han River” (“Han guang,” ode 9) is a similarly enticing and unreachable young woman, roaming about in the Han River where she “cannot be sought.” There is in these poems a veritable cult of the unattainable object of desire, and the melancholic men who narrate them wallow in unsatisfied lust and masochistic pain like pigs rolling in so much mud. “How could I not long for you?/ Distant, no one can reach there 豈不 爾思，遠莫致之” exclaims the narrator of “The Bamboo Rods” (“Zhu gan,” ode 59), mixing longing with desire in yet another melancholic poem set on the banks of a river.51 “The Bamboo Rods” is traditionally understood as narrated by a woman. This reading probably builds on the parallelism in stanzas one and two between the character yuan 远 (“far away”) which in the second stanza unambiguously describes the “brother, father and mother” of a girl “on a journey.” The person whom the poem addresses, however, is praised in stanza three for his or her “artful smile” (qiao xiao 巧笑) and “girdle-gems,” while the narrator of stanza four sets out on a trip in a cypress boat “to relieve my angst.” It is not possible to arrive at a conclusive reading. One alternative—and the speculative nature of my suggestion should be plain—is to follow Marcel Granet in taking “Zhu gan” as a dialogue, where the first and third stanzas are narrated by the man addressing the girl, while the second and fourth stanza are spoken by the girl. See *Fêtes et chansons anciennes de la Chine* (Rpt; Paris: Albin Michel, [1919] 1982); pp. 240-49; note, however, that this is not Granet’s own interpretation of “The Bamboo Rods,” for which see p. 97.

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51 In “Quiet Girl” (“Jing nü,” ode 42) the male narrator is dumb-struck when his virtuous girlfriend fails to show up at a secret meeting:

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How beautiful the chaste and pure girl
awaiting me at the nook of the city wall
She is hidden and invisible
I scratch my head and walk back and forth
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In lieu of the girl whom he desires he shifts his attention to an object related to her:

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She gave me a red tube ...
[but] it is not you, tube, that is beautiful
you are but the gift of a beautiful person.

All the more interesting, then, that in “I Lift My Skirt” the bewitching river-girl suddenly speaks out about her own desire:

| 子惠思我 | If you caringly/obediently long for me |
| 嬌裳涉漥 | [I shall] lift my skirt and wade across the Zhen river |
| 子不我思 | If you do not long for me |
| 豈無他人 | How could there not be other men? |
| 狂童之狂也且 | You most foolish of foolish boys |

子惠思我 | If you caringly/obediently long for me |
嬌裳涉漥 | [I shall] lift my skirt and wade across the Wei river |
子不我思 | If you do not long for me |
豈無他士 | How could there not be other gentlemen? |
狂童之狂也且 | You most foolish of foolish boys |

Again, this poem seems to be “literature” in an entirely modern sense in that it is a carefully formed, personal poem of high cultural status. Moreover, the ambiguity, and the fact that it was recognized by the Confucian commentators, seem to suggest that “I Lift My Skirt” was not hermeneutically overdetermined but to some extent left open and handed over to the reader for his or her extrapolation. Indeed, a discourse that invites extrapolation is necessarily obscure, fragmentary, “unwholesome.” The question, of course, is whether such ambiguity—which so seduces the present reader—was not only recognized but also appreciated by the Confucian tradition. It obviously was not. The two commentaries struggle, albeit somewhat differently, to hem the poem and tie it to a particular historical context.

On a quick first reading, the narratrix of “I Lift My Skirt” seems to be the incarnated nightmare (or secret wet dream) of the melancholic men of “Guan ju,” “Han guang,” “Zhu gan,” and “Jing nü”: a sexually emancipated woman who does not hesitate to discard her lover if he does not satisfy her. Conversely, she promises to cross the border constituted by the river if instead she finds the man to her liking.

Yet the happy interpretation of the narratrix as a “strong” woman, a pre-Confucian feminist who knows precisely what she wants, is countered by a second reading that instead exposes her as a “hollow subject.” My

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52 *Hui* 惠 can mean both “caringly” and “obediently,” and this ambiguity is fully realized by the poet.
lapse into psychoanalytical parlance is not unfounded here for the narratrix in fact promises that she can be had simply on the condition that her hypothetical partner does what he always has done, that is desire (si) her. In this paradoxical reading, the girl at the borderline is endlessly narcissistic but lacks a true personality, or psychic kernel; she has no other demand than that the man whose desire she desires should desire her. She does not look to him for any positive characteristics, such as good manners, education, beauty, bravery, noble ancestry. The man she approaches therefore appears to her, and to the reader, to be as hollow as herself.

Thus, if the first phase of interpretation was seemingly anti-Confucian and construed the narratrix of “I Lift My Skirt” as a willful and full subject, the second reading is truly uncanny in its ultra-Confucian, misogynic description of woman as hollow and devoid of positive characteristics. And perhaps this is the real nightmare for the young men who elsewhere in the Odes pine away for their loved ones—that female sexual desire, and woman herself, may at first glance appear real but in fact turns out to be a phantasmatic construction. There is “no one home” in the female body. Any man who wants a woman badly enough can have her. Perhaps, then, the boy in “Quiet Girl” is better off revering his red tube, and perhaps the young man in “Guan ju” enjoys his solitary but sweet reverie more than he would the borderline girl whose willingness to hitch up her skirt would no doubt terrify him.

Thus far ode 87 itself. I hope I have demonstrated that even the least noticeable of Odes may on a second look turn out to be “difficult,” indeed, “borderline” and in want of a solid hermeneutic kernel. Yet, to modern sensibility the apparent ambiguity and the two conflicting modes of reading are not problematic but rather appealing as a representation of the complexity and ambivalence of the human psyche and human sexuality. And as suggested above, such “openness” of the poetic text would seem to speak in favour of its being, in the sense introduced earlier, presentational. Yet it is precisely at the juncture between the open, unfinished text and the overdetermined Confucian interpretation that the most glaring discrepancy between modern Western aesthetics and Confucian commentary appears.

What happens when a complex poetic text is canonized and integrated into the *Classic of Odes*? How does the allegorical recitation (fu 賦) of “I Lift My Skirt” relate to the Confucian commentary that accompanies the inscription of the poem into the Canon? The cultural value that this ode
was given in the Chinese tradition was, I suspect, closely related to the *use*

it was put to in ritualized, diplomatic recitals, as we shall now see.

I claimed above that two conflicting interpretations of “I Lift My Skirt”

were each adopted by one particular commentary. According to the allegorical interpretation of “Qian shang” in the second century “Mao Preface”

this poem speaks of

> a longing to be corrected. A foolish youth acted wantonly [and] the
> Men of the state [of Zheng 鄫] desired to be rectified by a greater state

思見正也。狂童恣行。國人思大國之正己也。\(^{53}\)

In this reading the ambiguity and ambivalence that characterize the poem itself have completely disappeared. For the original man/woman dualism a strong state/weak state dualism has been substituted in which the young woman who in the poem itself so forcefully demands to be desired now allegorically refers to the Men of the State (*guo ren 国人*), and their rather more submissive request that they be “rectified” by a greater state which, in turn, corresponds to the man who “loves and protects” in the original.

This hermeneutic maneuver is both deft and illogical. It is remarkably economical, for in one sweep the “Preface” manages to transform all components of the original into an allegorical unity: the lovers become two states, the “crazed boy” a perverted ruler, and sexual desire becomes the longing for political change. Yet the cracks in the allegorical facade are clearly visible. Most conspicuously, the claim that it is the Men of the State (who allegorically correspond to the *young woman*) who “desire” (*si 思*) is clearly inconsistent with the implicit analogy between the two lovers and the two states, since in the original it is the “foolish boy” who desires and pines for the girl. The “Preface” is here so keen to incorporate all components of the original poem into an allegorical whole that it ends up contradicting itself.\(^{54}\)

If Mao thus relies on the misogynic reading that defines woman in terms of lack Mr. Lü, in an interpretation that in its allegorical workings is very similar, stresses rather the “strong woman” aspect of “I Lift My Skirt.”

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\(^{53}\) SSJYJS, p. 358; Legge, *The She King*, p. 51.

\(^{54}\) The Confucian technique of hermeneutical overkill, in which certain words and phrases are simultaneously given more than one interpretation, is perhaps best compared to the Freudian overdetermination, i.e. the mechanism which invests a psychic formation (a dream, a slip of the tongue, a symptom) with not one but many meanings.
“Qiu ren 求人” chapter of Mr Lü’s Annals describes how “Qian shang” was recited at a diplomatic meeting between representatives from the states of Jin 晋 and Zheng 郑:

The men of Jin wanted to attack Zheng and so sent the envoy Shu Xiang 叔向 to make an official visit and inspect their capacity. The Zheng diplomat Zi Chan 子産 recited an Ode:

If you obediently/caringly desire me
I shall hitch up my skirt and wade the Wei river
If you don’t desire me
how could there be no other gentlemen?

Shu Xiang returned home and reported: “There are [able] men in Zheng, Zi Chan is among them. Zheng cannot be attacked for [the states of] Qin and Chu are nearby. His poem had another meaning [qi shi you yi xin 其詩有異心; alternatively: 'his poem had a rebellious intent'].”

Although the situation described here may appear slightly comical in its implicit homoeroticsm, it is in fact coolly hostile. That Zi Chan assumes the persona of a young woman who promises to lift her skirt and wade the river clearly suggests that if Jin will not offer their protection Zheng will find other and more caring allies, as indeed becomes obvious to Shu Xiang when the poem is decoded and properly reinterpreted, hence his report that “Zheng cannot be attacked for Qin and Chu are nearby.” That Zi Chan, representing the weaker state, assumes the female role indicates that Zheng is not itself strong (like the woman is not a “full subject”) but derives strength from the alliances that it may form with other states. But although the “independent woman” reading of this poem is downplayed in favour of an interpretation that regards the woman as essentially weak and powerless, she—the state of Zheng—is nonetheless fully capable of assuming control over the situation. Therefore, Zi Chan’s allegoresis differs markedly from Mao’s interpretation in the “Preface.” Both conceptualize the relationship between two states in terms of an amorous relationship, but in Mr. Lü there is no talk of Zheng desiring to be passively “rectified” (zheng 正) by a mightier state.

We saw in Mr. Zuo’s Commentary that Lupu Gui defended his incestuous marriage with a reference to the habit of misquoting the Odes. Likewise, the most obvious difference between Mr. Lü and Mao’s “Preface” is revealed by Shu Xiang’s comment that “his poem had another meaning” (qi shi you yi xin 其詩有異心). This reveals that Shu Xiang recognized the

non-allegorical, *conventional* meaning of “Qian shang,” and that Zi Chan’s rhetorically *double* use of the poem created in him a moment of puzzle-ment and a need to re-read, and interpret the poem anew.\(^{56}\) And, in fact, the phrase which designates textual ambiguity is itself relevantly ambiguous. Thus that Zi Chan’s allegorical use of “I lift my skirt” is described by way of the ambiguous word *yi* (divergent/double/other/rebellious) comes as no surprise. With our analysis of “The Great East” in mind we may take the word *yi* as an indication that Mr. Lü paradoxically regarded allegorical (or tropologic or metaphorical) meaning as “weird” and “deviant” and, at the same time, unavoidable.

### Beyond and Beside Presentational Discourse: The Hybrid and the Difficult Text

*Why a Chinese metapoetics?*

When prominent sinologists speak of a typically Chinese “associative intellect” or of an ancient Chinese theory of poetic imagery that held that “the connections between … objects … are … already pre-established,” then they are *teasing out* an ancient Chinese poetics that at best was only implicit in Warring States texts. Neither in the *Odes* nor in Warring States philosophy overall, is there a meta-poetic concept of “literature” that would *exhaustively* theorize, explain and sum up what took place when the *Odes* were created, recited and interpreted.\(^{57}\) Determined to look for a concept (“literature”) which does not exist we will nonetheless find around its fringes fragmentary concepts which describe, metapoetically, how the *Odes*, their composition and function were conceived in ancient times. As I perceive it, this is indeed both the drawback and strength inherent in the project, and the discussion that springs from the absent concept of literature is illuminating. Indeed, nothing stops us from posing the relevant question of how the ancient Chinese themselves theorized what they were doing when they created, recited and interpreted the *Odes*.

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56 It is noteworthy that the text here says that “his poem [i.e. the poem in the sense Zi Chan used it] had an aberrant intention.” Cf. Saussy, *Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic*, pp. 64–65, for a discussion of conceptions of original vs. allegorical meaning in early China.

57 It could be argued that such a concept, *shi*, appears in the so-called “Great Preface,” the treatise on the origin and function of poetry that was incorporated into the first “Preface.” See Rölliche, *Die Fährte* and my “A Second Look.”
There also exist, on the one hand, negative definitions of what an ode is supposed to be: it is not "lies," "dream-interpretation," "divination" or "drunken talk." These linguistic and interpretative activities are mentioned in, and in relation to, the Odes but stand in obvious contrast to shi 詩. On the other hand, there are fragmentary concepts, such as the ambiguous e 詩 which relevantly refers both to "persuasive" and "mutated" discourse, or zeng 贈 "gift," song 誦 "recitation," shi 詩 "wording," hong 註 "overflowing, unrestrained" which describe various aspects of the Odes, both as regards their social and literary status. Lastly, there are (as in the final stanzas of "The Great East") several examples of poems that through their own rhetorical twists and turns comment on their own rhetorical mode of being. It is to this third group that I will now turn.

A first genealogy: the mantic text

If above I tried to sketch a general picture of the Odes and their role in Warring States China I shall now draw attention to a smaller group of poems which are literary in a more specific sense. That Zi Chan’s allegorical appropriation of “I Lift My Skirt” was described as yi 異 (otherwise, weird, devious, double, rebellious) by Shu Xiang is not fortuitous, but hints at a playful movement of irony and self-reflexivity inherent in some Odes.

I shall, however, first venture a genealogy which relates these difficult poems to the “associative intellect” to which I referred at the very beginning of this paper. I will exemplify Pauline Yu’s cosmological “connections” and Edward Shaughnessy’s “associations,” not to deny that such a correlative thinking did exist in ancient China but to indicate that it was rather the ideological and intertextual prima materia against which the poets of the Odes reacted in order to make the poetic text difficult, to puzzle the reader and to spur him or her to re-reading.

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58 The fourth stanza of “Lacking Sheep” (“Wu yang,” ode 190) describes how a “great man divines” a shepherd’s dream about a multitude of fish as a portent of future great harvests. This hints at an interest in hermeneutical methodology but deviates from what the Odes (and Mr. Zuo’s Commentary) have to say about the metaphorical and allegorical qualities of the Odes. In various Odes “lying” and “slander” and “drunken words” are explicitly opposed to poetic activity, yet often these linguistic activities are paradoxically described in similar terms. See here my “Illusion, Lie, and Metaphor.”

59 For e see my “Illusion, Lie and Metaphor,” pp. 275–79 and passim (e is here transcribed as eh). The “recitation” (yong) of the grand “wording” (shi) is described as a gift (zeng) in the last stanza of “Soaring and High” (“Song gao,” ode 259). And in “Shao’s Nimbleness” (“Shao min,” ode 265) the slander is ambiguously described as “theft” (zei, thus indicating usurpation) and as hui, meaning both “unrestrained, turbulent” and “luxurious.” I will explore the metapoetic implications of these conceptual clusters elsewhere.
Edward Shaughnessy spoke about the "associative intellect" in connection with the *Zhou Changes* (*Zhouyi*, the earliest stratum of *Yijing*, or *I-ching* 易經). Let us therefore begin with some examples from this text, which modern sinologists, including Shaughnessy, have described as a divination manual. Both examples "connect" or "associate" natural phenomena, first a flying *long* 龍 (commonly translated as "dragon") and then a *mingyi*-bird, with human action:

A flying *Long* (Dragon?) in the Sky  飛龍在天  
Beneficial to see the great man  利見大人  

The *mingyi*-bird in flight  明夷于飛  
droops its left wing  垂其左翼  
The gentleman on a journey  君子于行  
for three days does not eat  三日不食

What is the rationale for these correlations of Nature and Man? It should be noted that Shaughnessy does not hold that divinations such as those recorded in the *Zhou Changes* were actually "prompted by the fantastic appearance of a dragon in the sky or any other natural omen." But nonetheless, elsewhere in Shaughnessy’s treatise, the natural phenomena which the "associative intellect of ancient China" correlated with human events are described in terms of "portents" or "omens." Thus, with regard to the second example, Shaughnessy allows that the sight of the *mingyi* "was indeed considered to be an inauspicious portent" which "portended imminent danger," and this is a hypothesis which I accept.

What is important in the present context is that the correlations are causal (although cause-and-effect here work in mysterious ways) and therefore very real. Indeed, Pauline Yu’s thesis is quite apt with regard to the *Zhou Changes*, and deserves to be reiterated in full: "the connections between subject and object or among objects, which the West has by and large credited to the creative ingenuity of the poet, are viewed in the Chinese tradition as already pre-established." And, as I indicated above, the

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60 Cf. Kunst, *The Original Yijing*, pp. 240–41. This is the first of the 84 hexagrams. See also Shaughnessy, "‘Qian’ and ‘Kun’ Hexagrams."
62 Shaughnessy, *Composition of the “Zhouyi”*, p. 103.
63 Ibid.
inevitable consequence is that a *positive relation* always obtains between a natural phenomenon (or the image thereof) and human action.

In the *Odes*, as we have seen, Nature and Man are often correlated in a manner which *in form* is identical to the imagistic structure of the *Zhou Changes*, and it is Shaughnessy's thesis that both the *Changes* and the *Odes* originated from the scribes-cum-diviners at the royal courts during the tenth century. For our purposes, the problem with the *Odes* is that they juxtapose natural imagery and human action but seldom provide clues about the character of their internal relation. One important exception is "Egrets in Flocks" ("Zhen lu," poem 278) which in fact drops an important hint about the relationship between the natural imagery with which the piece begins and the human situation, in this case a grand feast, which the poem describes:

| 振鹭于飞 | In flocks, the egrets in their flight |
| 于彼西陂 | in that western marsh; |
| 我客戾止 | Our guests are arriving – |
| 亦有斯容 | also having this appearance |

Generally speaking, the most conspicuous rhetorical device of the *Odes* is the plain juxtaposition of an image drawn from nature (here, the first two lines) and the ensuing description of a human situation, without any copula revealing the exact nature of this relationship. Here, unusually enough, the function of the natural image, which the Confucian commentators later named *xing* 興 ("to begin," "to arouse"), is clearly spelled out by the fourth line which explains the image as a simile likening the "appearance" of the guests arriving in great numbers to the egrets flying in flocks: the guests *also* (yi 亦) have this appearance. The emphasis on the guests' "appearance" (*rong* 容) is of the utmost importance, for it indicates that what the poet intended was merely to show a superficial similarity in outward appearances. It is thus neither a description of a similarity in character or behaviour between egrets and guests, nor a correlation of a seasonal event in nature (the migration of egrets) with a seasonal ritual (the arrival of noble guests at the royal court). Nonetheless, the correlations of nature and man are still positive.

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65 *SSJYJS*, pp. 1023–24. *lung* 畿 ("marsh") rhymes with *diung* 容 ("appearance"). A similar example, 200:1 (*SSJYJS*, p. 767) compares slanderous talk to a richly ornate brocade: "Complex! Interwoven! / Perfected is this shell-brocade / Those slandering men / have also [yi] achieved that magnitude." Note that the word *yi* here functions as a metaphoric copula just as in ode 278.

66 The correlation of seasonal and ritual events was an important part of the correlative cosmology that we find traces of in third century BCE texts, such as the "Yue ling" chapter.
Deviation

As a preamble to my analyses of “Crane Calls” (“He ming,” ode 184), “The Great East” and “In the Wilderness Is a Dead Deer” (“Ye you si jun,” ode 23) below, I will now give an example of a poem wherein the negation of positive correlations signals the shift from the causality and directness of a divinatory, religious discourse to what one may venture to call an aesthetic logic. In my analysis of “Quails in Pairs” I demonstrated that the natural imagery of the first two lines was negated by what was taking place in the human realm.

A similar logic obtains in “On the Mountain There Are Fusu-trees” (“Shan you fusu,” ode 84). I shall consult not only the “Mao Preface” but also the contemporary “Mao Commentary” (“Maozhuan 毛傳”) and its reading of the first two lines of this poem:

山有扶蘇, On the mountain there are fusu-trees
隰有荷華, In the swamps there are lotus flowers

Mao’s “Commentary” says that what these lines are implying is “that high and low, big and small all obtain what is appropriate [for them] 高下大小各得其宜.” And in Mao’s semiotic system the high mountain is frequently a metaphor for high position and, in particular, of the ruler, while the low-lying swamps metaphorically refer to the lowly minister. What the opening lines are describing metaphorically, then, is the fortunate and appropriate situation where a Superior Man rules and the petty man occupies a lowly position, just as the fusu-tree and the lotus flower are found in their natural and proper habitats.

But this order is contrasted to the disorder of the following lines, and the reader expecting a positive correspondence between Nature and Man is duly shocked:

不見子都, I do not see Zi Du
乃見狂且, I only see a mad man!

We will presently encounter this playful vacillation between norm and deviation in “Crane Calls” and even more elaborately in “The Great East.”

of the Liji (cf. note 2 above). Note, however, that neither Mao Heng (second century BCE.) nor Zheng Xuan (second century CE, a time when correlative cosmology had been in vogue for several centuries) makes any explicit references to such correlations; SSJYJS, pp. 1023–24. 67 SSJYJS, pp. 354–55.
Michael Riffaterre has, in the wake of the Russian Formalists, described the poetic text as purposely “difficult.” According to Riffaterre, on an initial reading the poetic text is understood semantically, that is grammatically and syntactically, but is so full of deviations that it forces its reader to re-read and reevaluate. On the second reading the literariness of the poetic text appears. What first appeared as disparate deviations are now understood as part of a common code that runs through the text, uniting it and sublating it.

The appropriateness of Riffaterre’s scheme of reading will become obvious in connection with “The Great East” but ode 84 is also based on the same semiotic model. The “Mao Commentary” comments that “Zi Du was a person praised and loved by his [generation=] contemporaries” (ibid.). According to Mao’s “Commentary,” the poem’s narrator expects to see the throne occupied by the honourable Zi Du (whose historical identity has never been disclosed), but finds it usurped by a maniac. The first lines promise order, the following ones deliver only disorder; the human world disappoints us by negating the ideal that the natural imagery had set up. But on a second reading by a reader informed of the grand topics running through the *Odes* the mismatch of natural ideal and human foolishness conforms to the prevalent theme of illusion, and so the tension between the natural correspondence between high and low and the deviation from that blessed norm is sublated and turns into a statement about the deceptiveness of appearances.

The “Mao Preface” acknowledges this by saying that this poem “criticizes befuddlement. What is [praised as] ‘beautiful’ is not beautiful.” In other words, lines one and two—and thus the clever poet himself—lie, but with a purpose, since the whole piece should be understood as a critique of confusion, or conversely, of the inability to detect the illusion, the rotten core underneath the polished exterior. We shall see the same rhetorical logic at work in “The Great East.”

*The resistance of the Chinese imaginary: a figural movement in the Odes*

“Crane Calls” (“He ming,” ode 184) is one of the most remarkable odes. By allowing oneself to be seduced by its jumbled logic one can, paradoxically, find one’s bearings within the rhetorical world of the *Odes* and their commentators.

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鹤鸣于九皋
声闻于野
鱼潜于渊
或在芦渚
乐彼之园
爰有树檀
其下维萚
他山之石
可以攻玉

鹤鸣于九皋
声闻于天
鱼在于渚
或在渊
乐彼之园
爰有树檀
其下维萚
他山之石
可以攻玉

The crane cries in the Nine marshes
its voice is heard in the wilds;
Fish hide in the deep waters
or lie by the islet:
Happy is that garden –
There is a tan-tree
under it are fallen fruits;
Stones of other mountains
may be used as whetstones

The crane cries in the nine marshes
its voice is heard in the heavens;
Fish lie by the islet
or hide in the deep waters;
Happy is that garden –
There is a tan-tree
under it are gu-bushes;
The stones of other mountains
may be used to work the jade

We shall pay close attention to the use of natural imagery in this poem. The opening lines describe the crane’s call spreading into the wilderness (ye野), the uncultivated premises outside the city-states’ walls, a border-line location for uncultivated and lustful behaviour. The following lines contrast the fish diving in the depth with the fish playing in shallow water around the islets. The next line quite unexpectedly introduces not human action but yet another natural scene, namely that of the garden, the most cultivated and sophisticated of all landscapes, and therefore the very antithesis of wilderness. The garden here is anthropomorphically described as being “happy”—a forceful, yet bewildering statement in contrast to the plain descriptions of nature that preceded it. How come the garden is happy? The poem answers: beneath it lies fallen fruit. The “happy” garden is thus in a state of degeneration, neglected by the cultivating human hand that one would expect to pick the fruit and put it to use. The first stanza


70 Ye was thus the uncultivated and dangerous lands through which one had to travel in ancient times when going from one state (pun intended) to another. In the Shijing, perhaps most obviously in the poem “In the Wilderness Is a Dead Deer” (ode 23, see below), ye connotes the “wilderness” of the female heart, finding herself in both a literal and mental “wilderness.” See also Zhao Shichao’s thorough analysis of the discourse in ancient texts on “states and the wilderness” in Zhoudai guo-ye guanxi yanjiu (diss., Sichuan Univ., 1998; reprinted in the Wenjin publishing house’s Dalu diqu boshilunwen series, Taipei, 1993). The seemingly hellenocentric expression “city states” (“chengbang”) is taken from Tu Cheng-sheng, Zhoudai chengbang (Taipei: Lianjing, 1979).
ends with a *non serviam*: stones from *other* mountains may be used as whet-stones (the polishing of jade being a common metaphor for the cultivating influence of Confucian rituals on raw human nature). 71

As a first, makeshift interpretation of "Crane Calls," we could say that it celebrates a Taoist embrace of Nature and human passivity, and the rejection of (both social and agricultural) cultivation. The crane's call is carried into the wilderness but receives no reply (unlike the bird "searching a friend's voice" in "Chopping Wood," ode 165); the fish roam around peacefully, being neither prey nor hunters; the garden is neglected, and is thus slowly reverting to its primal, natural state, and its fruit—i.e. food, man's most basic and valuable commodity—is rotting away. The resistance to being used is then repeated in the laconic statement about letting other stones be whet-stones: it is, we could say, praise of *being* and rejection of being an *instrument*.

Thus far this is a thematic interpretation. Let us now change perspectives and turn to the rhetorical strategy of "Crane Calls." Paradoxically, this poem is as far as one can imagine from the natural, carefree and artless state of being it honours. It is a scrupulously well-wrought poem constructed with reference to, and certainly against, a rhetorical tradition which we will now proceed to reconstruct by way of an intertextual reading. Let me anticipate my conclusion by saying that it is in this engagement in, and playful negation of, a rhetorical tradition that I perceive a tendency, in some *Shijing* poems, toward true presentational discourse, a will on the part of the ancient Chinese poem to be an aesthetic object freed from any ideological *use*.

Let us take this opportunity to outline what could lie beyond presentational discourse in its stipulated sense. Wolterstorff's account of presentational discourse stresses its "offering for consideration ... certain states of affairs—for us to reflect on, to ponder over, to conduct strandwise extrapolation on." 72 As I said above, a discourse that invites extrapolation is necessarily obscure and fragmentary. Being neither informational nor directive it hinders the reader in his carefree pursuit of meaning. In the terminology of Viktor Shklovsky, such "defamiliarizing" discourse intends to

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71 Cf. Karlgren's laconic note on the literary meaning of "Crane Calls": "The metaphorical sense of this is doubtful. Probably it expresses somebody's delight in living in retreat, enjoying the pleasures of nature, and refusing to come forth and engage in official work: let the stones of other hills serve as grinding stones—let other men serve as useful tools." *Book of Odes*, p. 127.

72 Cf. note 31 above.
“make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.” We could thus say that presentational discourse is characterized by an awareness of its own rhetorical status, especially in relation to the tradition in which it appears.

We are now in a better position to appreciate the rhetorical niche that “Crane Calls” carves out for itself in the Shi corpus. As we concluded above, the poem praises naturalness and deplores false distortions of Nature, hence the pleasure taken in seeing the garden degenerating. Formwise, “Crane Calls” uses the parallelisms and oppositions so typical of later Chinese poetry. Thus, the crane’s call is carried lengthwise into the wilderness in the first stanza, and altitude-wise to the heavens in the second stanza. The depth of the waters in which some fish hide is contrasted with the shallowness of the waters around the islets. Moreover, the second stanza by and large mirrors the first with only minor alterations, most notably the inversion of lines three and four in the second stanza.

In this fashion “Crane Calls” very cleverly and playfully employs, as a means of defamiliarization, the figure called aprosdoketon (Greek “surprise,” “the unexpected”) by classical Western rhetoricians. As “Egrets in Flocks” (and the Confucian interpretation thereof) has shown us, the natural image which opens most Shijing poems is commonly correlated with some human action which it metaphorically describes. Hence the shock one experiences when line three of “Crane Calls,” instead of introducing a narration of human action, goes on to describe yet another natural scene, thereby wilfully breaking the expectations set up by the initial image. Like the screams of the crane which reach out into the wilderness without receiving a reply, the natural imagery with which the poem opens is never “answered” by human action.

Very shrewdly, by refusing to let the opening image be followed by an account of human action, “Crane Calls” manifests rhetorically the refusal to be used which it takes as its theme. The image of the crane thus resists all attempts by a poetic or Confucio-hermeneutical project to put it to use, just like the fallen fruit slowly rotting under the tree is left uneaten and undigested by any metabolic system, and like the unattended garden in which the traces of human cultivation are disappearing.

73 Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” p. 12.
74 Cf. Ulrich Unger, *Rhetorik des klassischen Chinesisch*, p. 40. Unger wisely states that “the unexpected resists classification.” Perhaps for this very reason, Lausberg does not list the aprosdoketon.
For the benefit of our further discussion, I would like to make two comments at this point. First, as compared to "Egrets in Flocks," this poem comes much closer to our concept of literature. The fact that the poem is rhetorically structured in concert with its theme indicates very clearly a high level of rhetorical self-awareness, i.e. that it is a discourse in which the mode of expression is as important as the message it conveys. To continue in Jakobson's terminology, this poem displays such a perfect marriage of form and content that one cannot make a relevant distinction between "message" and "code." Michael Riffaterre's assertion, in the wake of Jakobson's theory, that poetic discourse is a repetitious variation on one and the same theme (a "transformation of the [extratextual] matrix") is also pertinent for our analysis of "Crane Calls," for on a second reading the poem comes together as a perfect unity, in which all parts contribute to a harmonious whole. To use a Freudian term once again, the poem is overdetermined. Secondly, the Verfremdung-effect "Crane Calls" achieves is due to its playful and conscious deviation from the rhetorical tradition of the Odes. Not only is this instance of defamiliarization a highly literary device, which further supports my suggestion that "Crane Calls" is in a relevant sense imaginative literature. By voiding the tradition not only of positive "connections" or "associations" but of correlations altogether, the poem also confirms that it is part of that tradition, yet simultaneously a conscious and elaborate reaction to it and development of it.

It is therefore a self-conscious, figural, and intertextual discourse whose counterpart we will not find in the Zhou Changes or in the historiographical bronze inscriptions, or in the ritual parts of the Odes. Perhaps it is here that metapoetic discourse makes its first appearance in early China.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, by opting to be and refusing to be used, "Crane Calls" manifests itself as an aesthetic object.

Another genealogy: the historiographical bronze inscriptions

By defining the true poetic text as difficult, deviating, overdetermined, intertextually coded, and in need of re-reading I also define the non-poetic text as devoid of these qualities. And if the playful negation of the correlations of Nature and Man was one of the means by which the Odes achieved this complexity, then the other major discourse from which the literary Odes sublate themselves is constituted by the historiographical works Spring and Autumn (Chun qiu) and the Book of Documents (Shang shu), as

well as the lengthy texts inscribed on ritual bronze vessels from the early Zhou period (ca. 900–700).

The connections between the Odes, the Documents and the bronze inscriptions appear well-founded. Shaughnessy describes the striking similarity between traditional bronze inscriptions from the early Zhou Dynasty and the ode "The Jiang and Han Rivers" ("Jiang Han," ode 262). The same scholar demonstrates similar stylistic links between the famous "Lord Mao Tripod" (毛公鼎) inscription and "The Command of Duke Wen" ("Wenhui zhi ming 文候之命") chapter of the Documents. C. H. Wang reconstructs five lengthy Odes (nos. 245, 250, 237, 241 and 236) as parts of an epic (sic!) of the founding of the Zhou Dynasty by King Wen, a suite of poems Wang consequently names "The Weniad." Despite the doubt one may feel about the concept of an early Chinese epic, Wang's study does demonstrate the historiographic tendency of these Odes.

The following text, a typical bronze inscription, was composed by an aristocrat named Bi on the occasion of presenting a ritual vessel to the memory of his father and uncle.

Bi bows and touches his head to the floor [and]
Daring to respond to the brilliant generosity of the Son of Heaven
Herewith fabricates this treasured gui-vessel for his illustrious deceased father, and [his] uncle Li
With which to bestow [upon them] longevity;
May it be used for 10,000 years
In the ancestral Hall

The present format does not allow for an in-depth analysis of these sources but I hold that, like the bulk of Odes, these texts are expertly formed and enjoy a high cultural status. Moreover, since many parts of the Documents and many inscriptions record speeches, or proclamations, by kings and aristocrats they are also to some extent personal. Yet nowhere do they break with linear narrative and evolve into the highly complex, ironic and circular textual structure that I have described above.

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76 Edward L. Shaughnessy, Sources of Western Zhou History: Inscribed Bronze Vessels (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Univ. of California Press, 1991), pp. 73–74.
77 Ibid., p. 75.
78 C. H. Wang, From Ritual to Allegory (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. of Hong Kong Press, 1988), chap. 4.
79 Shaughnessy, Composition of the "Zhouyi", p. 295.
80 For an important study of the prosody of the bronze inscriptions, see Wolfgang Behr, Reimende Bronzeinschriften und die Entstehung der Chinesischen Endreimdichtung (PhD diss.; (Frankfurt: Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Univ., 1996).
The pièce de résistance: “The Great East” and the illusion of metaphor

Let us return to the poem we started with. On a thematic level, “The Great East” is part of a cycle of poems that concern political usurpation and degeneration, personal catastrophe and disillusionment. It is a scrupulously composed poem, and no similar rhetorical organization can be found in the Zhou Changes, the Documents or the bronze inscriptions. Inscribed into this poem is a movement of ironical suspense, or tension, followed by a necessity to re-read and revise. And nowhere is the playful negation of the positive correlations of Nature and Man more obvious than here.

The seven stanzas begin by depicting ritual vessels full of food and fine eating utensils for ritual use, images that connect well with the subsequent lines about the elevated and perfectly straight Way of Zhou (note the double entendre of dao 道: “road,” “Way,” “Tao”). That a change is about to happen is, however, intimated by the last lines of the first stanza which describe the tears that flow from the narrator’s eyes.

Why is the poet crying? Because of the destitution of the East, the empty shuttles and the impoverished people described in the second stanza. The poem, it appears, is spoken by a bitter yet stubborn adherent of the high values of the Western Zhou Dynasty which, after a succession of corrupt kings, degenerated sometime at the beginning of the eighth century, and whose power was usurped by its former vassal states.

This impression is strengthened in stanza four where the narrator rages against the parvenus—sons of boatmen and servants—from the Western states who have acquired both fine clothes and high offices.
The contrast between the happy moment of the first stanza and the sheer despair of the following stanzas thus seems to adhere to the pattern of order and deviation discussed above. But the poem is rather more complex and twisting than that. That bear fur, conventional sign of nobility, is worn by plebs is a semiotic deviation in that a signifier (fur) is matched with the wrong signified (commoners instead of noblemen). My reference to semiotics is not to suggest that semiotics proper existed in ancient China, but nor is it to overinterpret, for if there were not an implicit theory of the sign the lines about the bear fur (as a symbol, or sign, of wealth and nobility) would simply be incomprehensible.

At this point the reader is still in a state of suspense, and does not understand the function of the initial image of abundance of food and rituality as anything but a facile contrast to the state of destitution in the East. Not until, that is, he comes to the seventh and final stanza, where the depiction of eating utensils is resumed in a remarkable envoi:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>私人之子</th>
<th>The sons of servants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>伯儵是試</td>
<td>in the hundred offices they are used</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Suddenly, but belatedly, through the description of the useless Basket and the illusory Ladle, the reader grasps the thematic unity of the entire piece, and moves back to the initial stanza to re-read it. Just as "Shan you fusu" above, "The Great East" thematizes not only the degeneration of ethics but also the discontinuity between appearance and actuality. And just as in the former poem, the opening image does not positively correlate to a human situation since the abundance depicted there is negated by the miserable situation described by the narrator. The reader now understands that the initial images of abundance and well-ordered rituals are as hollow as the celestial Basket and Ladle. The patterns that are apparently in Nature are not to be trusted, nor are conventional signs such as bear fur, nor poetic imagery. This is indeed the lesson our metapoetic reading teaches us: correlations are always and everywhere in suspense, and one cannot approach the poetic text and expect it to work according to a natural, preset logic. They are all in need of re-reading, of a second look, hence the narrator's insistence on "looking," "gazing," and "scrutinizing" in the first stanza.

In this manner the theme, the imagery and the rhetorical structure of "The Great East" all deal with suspense, illusion and re-reading. In meta-
poetic terms, it deals with the deviousness of representation and can certainly not be accommodated within the cosmological poetics discussed above. Not only is the theory of pre-existing correlations between Nature and Man thwarted by the rhetorical organization of the poem, it is also frustrated at a metapoetic level by the fact that the poem inverts the conventional scheme of correlations, and begins with descriptions of man-made artifacts and ends, in yet another double movement, with natural images. On a larger scale, this again connects the poem to “Crane Calls” which similarly combined form and content in its celebration of uselessness and refusal to be used.

Again taking “Egrets in Flocks” (ode 278) as our measure, “The Great East” is endlessly more complex in its use of figurative language, forcing the reader to adjust himself or herself several times during the progress of the poem. And again, Riffaterre’s description of the Verfremdung-effect in the “semiotics of poetry” is felicitous, for it describes well how the poetic text constantly tricks the person fumbling his way through it for the first time, and how the “differing statements, first noticed as mere ungrammaticalities ... appear as variants of the same structural matrix” on a second reading.

The Chinese Poetic Text

*The eternal return of Eros and Thanatos*

“The Great East” is organized as a hermeneutic spiral: primitive understanding, puzzlement, suspense, epiphany, re-reading, belated but “wholesome” understanding. Instead of a conventional conclusion I will demonstrate how these stages—this textual *movement*—appear to be interlaced with the familiar themes of borderline desire and deviation in ode 23, “In the Wilderness Is a Dead Deer” (“Ye you si jun”).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>野有死麋</td>
<td>In the wilderness there is a dead deer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>白茅包之</td>
<td>white grass wraps it up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>有女懷春</td>
<td>There is a girl harbouring spring in her chest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>吉士誘之</td>
<td>a fortune-bringing knight leads her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>林有樛椨</td>
<td>In the woods there are shrubby bushes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>野有死鹿</td>
<td>in the wilderness there is a dead doe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>白茅純束</td>
<td>white grass wraps and entangles it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>有女如玉</td>
<td>There is a girl like jade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>