
Comparative Hermeneutics and Utopian Desire
*“Chinese Modernity” in Modern Chinese Aesthetics*¹

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1. Introduction

My discussion in this paper is premised on the observation that the radical possibilities of “comparison” in literary and cultural studies can be examined only if it is understood as a hermeneutic act that ultimately attempts to establish the new horizon of interpretation of the text. It is not merely one of the accepted “methodologies” of literary and cultural studies. So the meaning in comparative studies is not obtained by referring to the existing paradigms of interpretation, but must be produced by the very act of comparison itself. In this regard, it is worth referring to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call “*immanent criteria*”² of interpretation. Deleuze and Guattari, discussing the interpretation of the unconscious, oppose the reductionist analysis which deciphers the meaning only based on the metaphysical framework of the Oedipal relationship, and claim the ultimate necessity of “immanent criteria” to determine the legitimate interpretation, which should be discovered within the object of interpretation itself. This immanent, anti-transcendental interpretation of the text might be considered as an ideal of comparative reading. What one tries to do by comparing text X with text Y is, in essence, to unsettle the existing framework of interpretation by creating a tension between

1. This paper is based on the manuscript of my presentation given at the conference “Age of Comparison?” at New York University on March 28, 2008.

2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Viking, 1977), 109.

the two texts, and to find a new perspective on them from within the very act of comparison. This new perspective is not anticipated within the existing modes of interpretation, but brought into being only from within the texts themselves. Thus, in comparative reading, comparability is not guaranteed outside the text, but should be claimed by the interpretative act itself. Therefore, on a performative level, comparison is fundamentally a projection of the new, provisional mode of interpretation that must be eventually acknowledged and bring about the new horizon of interpretation. Comparison must have this utopian desire, and this is precisely why comparison must amount to an ethical-political endeavor.

From this basic theoretical perspective, this paper shall, first, revisit the influential polemic between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad in the late 1980s, and reconsider Jameson's concept of "national allegory" in order to situate the problem of comparison in the context of globalization. The comparison between radical otherness, which Jameson's interpretative strategy suggests, was also an essential theoretical task that the modern Chinese aesthician Zhu Guangqian had to wrestle with in his attempt to build the new aesthetics in modern China. I shall, then, discuss Zhu's strategy of comparison, especially in light of his most important theoretical reference Benedetto Croce, and examine how the place for "China" in modern Chinese aesthetics was theoretically structured by means of radical comparison.

2. Globalization and Radical Difference in Comparison: Jameson and Ahmad

It seems particularly significant to reconsider the problem of "comparison" in the era of globalization, whose world order is correctly described by what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call "Empire."³ Given their most essential but somehow hyperbolic argument of "there is no outside," and multiplicity that are reduced into manage-

3. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

able “differences” within this world order, everything in this world now seems to be “comparable” to each other so as to produce value within this homogeneous space. Comparison, instead of creating moments to criticize and analyze the socio-economic and historical conditions underlining this conspiratorial world order, rather seems to constitute rhetoric that affirms it. However, I would argue that “comparison” could take place between locations that have different political and historical conditions so that comparability itself should be radically questioned. Such comparison might contribute to expose some political “failure” of a society, which in turn constitutes its key political mechanism, and thus shows other political possibilities for it to accept more heterogeneous and singular identity formations. Then, such comparison, by changing the structure of the boundaries of that society, might be able to project different possibilities of relationship between the locations, which has not been recognized within the present controlled networks constituting the Empire. In doing so, it must show its aspiration for the truly global politics that the present Empire has never yet succeeded in putting into practice. This leads to a critique of the Empire that might be slightly different from that of Hardt and Negri’s strategy, which, in my view, fails to answer such a crucial question as *who* can participate in what they call “multitude.”

To consider the problem of comparison, here I would like to examine Fredric Jameson’s concept of “national allegory,” especially in light of Aijaz Ahmad’s well-known criticism of his article.⁴ Much has been said about this influential polemic, so I shall solely focus on Jameson’s strategy of comparison. Ahmad’s point in his critique of Jameson’s article “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital” is that Jameson’s discussion relies on a flawed binary opposition between the first and the third worlds, and in making, from its first-world standpoint, too generalizing an argument, like “[a]ll third-world texts are necessarily ... to be read as ... *national allegories*,” it amounts to a theoretical orientalism which “rests ... upon a suppression of the multiplicity of significant difference among and within

4. Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital,” *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 65–88; Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and ‘National Allegory,’” *Social Text* 17 (Autumn 1987): 3–25.

both the advanced capitalist countries and the imperialized formations.”⁵ Ahmad insists, instead of dividing the world into three, that the world should be viewed as united, in which, on the one hand, the global operation of the capitalist mode of production, and on the other, the global resistance to this mode are taking place.⁶ Thus, he demands a different critical perspective that can appreciate the multiple developments of such resistances in different parts of the globe (including the first world), which should not exclusively rely on nationalism, but can also be motivated by gender or race. On the contrary, Jameson strategically employs the distinction of the first and the third worlds in order to criticize the “first-world cultural tradition.”⁷ For Jameson, the third world is precisely the “reversal” of the first world, in that the first-world capitalist culture is characterized by “a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political,” whereas in third-world culture, “*the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*”⁸ Thus, Jameson’s allegorical reading of the third-world texts is performed to the very extent that it serves as a critique of the public-private split in Western culture, in which, however, according to Jameson, the allegorical structures are not so much absent as they remain “unconscious.” Jameson’s reading, then, suggests the necessity of new interpretative mechanisms that can decipher such unconscious allegorical structures in first-world cultural texts, which “necessarily entail a whole social and historical critique of our current first-world situation.”⁹ Jameson is, in fact, aware that whenever a *radical difference* or *radical otherness* is considered, there is a danger that the mechanism of orientalism is set in place. But such an operation of radical differentiation is needed precisely in order to point out the unconscious allegorical structures determining the social and cultural situation of the first world. The critical significance of Jamesonian comparison approaching a radical otherness can only

5. Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness,” 3.

6. *Ibid.*, 10.

7. Jameson, “Third-World Literature,” 71.

8. *Ibid.*, 69.

9. *Ibid.*, 79.

be understood if one appreciates his utopian project of “a whole social and historical critique” by means of the allegorical reading of cultural texts. But in light of Ahmad’s criticism, it still remains legitimate to pose the problem of orientalization; that is, representing third-world nationalism in terms of utopian desire might in turn assimilate the third world into the economy of the first world as its “lack” or object of desire. However, apart from his first-hand narrative of the history of Urdu literature, Ahmad’s global perspective, which embraces the *multiplicity* of situations in the globe, is on the one hand perfectly legitimate, but on the other, seems to lose a theoretical basis to criticize the socio-economic conditions enabling such global reality—global capitalism. From this perspective, nationalism seems to be crucial in this regard, because the critique of global capitalism, at least in part, requires a critique of the new form of *sovereignty* in the US-centered global order, as it is suggested by Hardt and Negri, and it seems to be still the *nation-states* that have to pursue, within a global context, yet another form of sovereignty that is neither the modern national sovereignty nor the postmodern waned one. For such a project, Jameson’s tactics of comparison and the concept of “national allegory” are extremely instructive. But it seems to be at the same time necessary to push them even further, by pursuing the possibilities of representing *a radical otherness without orientalism, and considering nationalism without nationality*.

3. Strategies of Comparison in Modern Chinese Aesthetics: Zhu Guangqian as a more radical Croce

Comparison between radical differences was the most essential theoretical problem that Zhu Guangqian (1897–1986) [朱光潜], prominent aesthetician and translator of Western thought in twentieth-century China, needed to attack. In his effort to establish the so-called “modern Chinese aesthetics” [中国现代美学], Zhu conducted comparison between radically different articulations and concepts of aesthetic phenomena in traditional Chinese poetics, on the one hand, and modern Western thought, on the other. Zhu tried

to give a theoretical basis to his attempt that distances itself both from traditional discourses and Western thought, by introducing and criticizing Benedetto Croce's (1866–1952) aesthetic thought. In this section, I shall examine the question of comparison raised by Croce and Zhu, and compare their interpenetrating ideas in order to shed light on Zhu's strategy of radical comparison.¹⁰

One of the objectives of Zhu's aesthetic program is, besides to establish "aesthetics" as a modern discipline in China, to pursue "poetic language," upon which the possibility of modern Chinese poetry is totally dependent. What attracts Zhu to Crocean aesthetics is nothing other than its most well-known thesis: "the identity of intuition and expression." This idea particularly appeals to Zhu for it provides him with a most direct way to "poetic language," thanks to its contention that pure and simple subjective intuition is in itself artistic expression. In this theoretical framework, however, a difficulty resides in the problem of the relationship of an artistic expression to another—i.e., the *comparability* among different artistic expressions. As Croce contends that every artistic expression is identical to intuition, which is in itself absolutely individual and cannot be repeated,¹¹ the aesthetic value of such expression is by definition absolute and must not be considered in comparison with any other expressions. As he argues, "every individual, indeed every moment of the spiritual life of an individual, has its artistic world; *none of these worlds can be compared with any other in respect of artistic value.*"¹² Thus, in Croce's perspective, every expression, as long as it is artistic, has its inherent, incomparable aesthetic value, and is completely independent of other expressions that are also scattered and separated from each other.

Zhu Guangqian, while placing Croce's theory as the basis of modern aesthetics, criticizes it particularly for its failure in considering the

10. As to Zhu Guangqian's relationship to Benedetto Croce from a more general perspective, see Hashimoto Satoru, "Zhu Guangqian and Benedetto Croce: The Place for 'China' in Aesthetics," *UTCP Review* 10 (2007): 147–61.

11. Cf. "[A]rt is intuition, and intuition is individuality, and individuality does not repeat itself" (Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic: As Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie [London: Vernon Press and Peter Owen, 1962], 136; emphasis added).

12. *Ibid.*, 137; emphasis added.

problems of “communication” and “value” in art.¹³ In particular, Zhu argues, “strictly speaking, there cannot be the problem of value in Croce’s aesthetics,” because “beauty [in Croce’s discussion] constitutes an absolute value and no comparison is worth considering,” and “in fact, the idea of absolute value fundamentally denies the existence of value.”¹⁴ Croce indeed believes that the beauty of an artistic expression is properly judged without exception to the extent that the expression at stake is truly successful, and thus artistic. This is because “[e]xpressive activity ... is not caprice, but *spiritual necessity*.”¹⁵ Thus, Croce argues that aesthetic value is necessarily judged in a correct way, and thus communication in art infallibly takes place. But Croce’s claim here is not simply an idealistic demand, as he nevertheless maintains that aesthetic value is inherent in each artistic expression in an absolutely independent way, and refuses to presuppose a certain ideal “model” “placed outside the artistic activity,” according to which aesthetic value would be judged in general.¹⁶ Croce, then, must be faced by a question of how each aesthetic value is in fact properly judged, even though it is incomparably independent and does not have any extrinsic or accepted criteria to be referred to. According to his discussion, “tradition” is what enables absolute values to be correctly appreciated. As he argues:

A condition for this historical labor [of judging the aesthetic value of an artistic expression] is *tradition, with the help of which it is possible to collect the scattered rays and concentrate them in one focus...* Where the tradition is broken, interpretation is arrested; in this case, the products of the past remain silent for us. Thus the expressions contained in the Etruscan or Mexican inscriptions are unattainable.¹⁷

13. Zhu Guangqian, *Wenyi Xinlixue* [文艺心理学], in *Zhu Guangqian Quanji* [朱光潜全集] (Hefei: Anhui Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1987-93), vol. 1, 362ff. Author’s translation here and after.

14. *Ibid.*, 366.

15. Croce, *Aesthetic*, 119; emphasis added.

16. *Ibid.*, 122.

17. *Ibid.*, 126; emphasis added.

It is this “tradition” that completes the ring of Croce’s theoretical endeavor. Were it not for tradition, artistic expressions are only scattered images, which would not be able to claim for any aesthetic value. It is only when “tradition” is understood that such images are “collect[ed]” and “concentrate[d] ... in one focus” to manifest their aesthetic value. However, Croce does not consider “tradition” to be something existing outside of individual artistic expressions, but he argues that it must be understood only through interpretations, or in his words, “*historical criticism*” of works of art.¹⁸ It is in this sense that he argues that this “historical criticism” is in itself “expression,” just as artistic activity is: “Artistic and literary history is therefore a *historical work of art founded upon one or more works of art.*”¹⁹ In other words, just as artistic activity does not have any exterior model of beauty, interpretations of works of art themselves do not have extrinsic criteria to be relied on. Put differently, “tradition” must be captured only through individual interpretations, and not be presupposed as a sort of historical context; thus, it must be projected as a horizon of interpretation in the very process of each interpretative practice.

When he criticizes Croce for his absolutism, Zhu mentions several factors as examples that he thinks undermine and differentiate the absoluteness of aesthetic value, such as the differences of technical maturity, media, and genre. Zhu’s criticism therefore can be summarized as a contention that Croce ignores such external factors that in fact are involved in the determination of aesthetic value. The function of such factors are represented by that of “language” mediating the process of expression, which Croce does not need to consider because of his theory of the immediate identity of intuition and expression.²⁰

18. Cf. “This brief exposition of the method by which is obtained the reintegration of the original conditions in which the work of art was produced, and consequently reproduction and judgment are made possible, shows how important is the function fulfilled by historical research in relation to artistic and literary works which is what is usually called *historical criticism* or method in literature and art. Without tradition and historical criticism the enjoyment of all or nearly all the works of art produced by humanity would be irrevocably lost: we should be little more than animals, impressed in the present alone, or in the most recent past” (*ibid.*, 128).

19. *Ibid.*, 131.

20. Zhu argues, “He [Croce] did not clearly recognize the importance of media for com-

From Zhu's perspective, "language" structuring the process of expression is inextricably related to the history of culture. When Zhu argues as follows, he proposes a historical perspective that seems to be very different from Croce's hermeneutic idea.

Thought and language are originally parallel and identical. Therefore, in the development of culture, the more thought progresses, the richer language becomes; while uncultivated nations and uneducated people not only have rough and puerile thought but their language is extremely simple. Culture grows and rises day by day, and what can be called dictionary expands accordingly. Each nation's differences in the customs of thought can be seen in the differences in the customs of language. Chinese thought and language both incline to synthesis, while Western thought and language both incline to analysis. Thought and language develop simultaneously, so they are parallel and identical; they cannot be separated or independent.²¹

Thus, language reflects the development of culture, in which people's thought also develops. More precisely, language represents a boundary of cultures that have different ways of thought or imagination. For Croce, such cultural differences are nothing but what should be, and can be overcome through the efforts of the "historical criticism." But as Zhu argues that it is necessary to take into consideration the factual difference of language and culture with regard to aesthetic value, he draws an ineffaceable line between different cultures—in particular between China and the West.

In fact, no matter how radical his historical hermeneutics is, Croce in the end of his work quite optimistically acknowledges the "progress" of historical knowledge: "*the ever-increasing accumulation of our historical knowledge, which makes us able to sympathize with all the artistic products of all people and of all times, or ... makes our taste*

munication in artistic imagination, but we combine language with feeling and image and make a unity. In his theory, the position for language was not settled, but according to us, language finds its place" (Zhu, *Wenyi Xinlixue*, 96).

21. Zhu Guangqian, *Shilun* [诗论], in *Zhu Guangqian Quanji* [朱光潜全集] (Hefei: Anhui Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1987–93), vol. 3, 91.

more catholic.”²² Thus, from Croce’s point of view, such cultural differences as Zhu argues—differences between Chinese and Western cultures—will become meaningless in a larger historical perspective obtained through the accumulation of historical knowledge, from which aesthetic value of both cultures can be equally appreciated. Therefore, while Croce emphasizes the absoluteness of each aesthetic value and the process of its interpretation, he nevertheless thinks that they constitute a part of a universal, catholic entity that he presupposes. In this sense, Crocean historical hermeneutics amounts to a universalizing process. On the contrary, Zhu’s theoretical framework suggests that one must examine aesthetic value of a certain culture, and does not dare to consider a superior perspective enabling to synthesize different values in different cultures. Therefore, what is at stake is not to accumulate historical knowledge, but to write the history of a particular culture determined by its own tradition, which is unable to be assimilated into a universal perspective.

However, when Zhu draws attention to cultural differences, his perspective in the quotation above seems to somewhat naïvely determine the boundary of Chinese culture by opposing it against the West with too simplistic a concept as “synthesis” as opposed to “analysis.” But the place for China, or the irreducible particularity of Chinese culture is in fact never a stable premise, precisely because, according to Zhu, the tradition determining its particularity is in itself something that must be *interpreted*, just like Croce’s “tradition”; and that tradition is explored only through *comparison* between China and the West. Zhu, then, does not consider tradition to be something already given in some way or another, but something that must be attained through comparison, especially in the context of the more and more numerous introduction of Western poetics and poetry. Zhu’s standpoint is best illustrated in the 1942 preface to his *Shilun* [诗论], or *On Poetry*, his full-fledged attempt of comparative poetics between China and the West, where he says,

In present China, studying poetics seems to be an even more press-

22. Croce, *Aesthetic*, 138; emphasis added.

ing issue. First and foremost, *all value comes from comparison; without comparison, there is no way to recognize advantage or disadvantage, good or bad.*²³

From *Shijing* [诗经] to *Wen Xin Diao Long* [文心雕龙] to Tao Yuanming's [陶渊明] poetry, the texts Zhu reinterprets in this book all belong to the Chinese Classics. But the readability of those Classics itself is, from his perspective, totally dependent on comparison. Thus, the space of his reading, suspended between Chinese and Western texts, is an allegorical space par excellence, where the meaning of the Classics must only be determined by the hermeneutic act itself. Therefore, tradition he pursues is only attained through an interpretative endeavor within this radically comparative force field between China and the West. In this book, Zhu attempts to write a history of Chinese poetry by employing the traditional dichotomic concepts of literary criticism: the “*bi*” and the “*xing*” [比兴], particularly referring to Liu Xie's [刘勰] *Wen Xin Diao Long*; but at the same time he reinterprets the meaning of the “*bi*” and the “*xing*” in light of other dichotomic concepts in Crocean aesthetics: “image” and “feeling.” In this way, he tries to rewrite the history of Chinese poetry, by changing and displacing the meaning of literary history written in the traditional discourse of literary criticism.²⁴ In this endeavor, Zhu's discussion refrains from simply employing either Liu Xie's concepts or those of Croce's as a theoretical basis for the history of Chinese poetry; instead, a tension between them is maintained without being assimilated into one another. Thus, the tradition of Chinese poetry is only written through comparison crossing an irreducible distance between China and the West, not on the basis of either of them, or a more universal framework that synthesizes them.

Therefore, as Zhu criticizes Croce's absolutism, and tries to point out factors differentiating aesthetic value, particularly the cultural difference between China and the West, and thus claims for a place for “China” in aesthetics, he needs all the more comparative hermeneu-

23. Zhu, *Shilun*, 4; emphasis added.

24. Cf. Zhu, *Shilun*, particularly chapter 3.

tics to determine the very particularity of Chinese aesthetics, just as Croce needs the self-reflexive, self-grounding historical hermeneutics to appreciate the absolutely incomparable aesthetic value. But while Croce believes in universalizing potential of such historical studies, Zhu solely concentrates on a one-to-one comparison of the two cultures, and refuses to presuppose any extrinsic order, so as to manifest the tradition of Chinese culture, and the so-called Chinese aesthetics. Thus, it is safe to say that as he criticizes Croce's absolutism, Zhu becomes a more radical Croce.

The theoretical framework of comparative aesthetics in Zhu's thought thus takes shape both through introduction and criticism of Crocean aesthetics. His criticism here must not be understood in such simple terms as "particularism" as opposed to "universalism," or "China" as opposed to the "West," rather it made Zhu touch on an essential problem in Crocean aesthetics in a more radical way than Croce himself. It is through radical comparison between China and the West that Zhu can give a place to "China" in modern aesthetics, and thus examine "poetic language" in modern China. If universality for Croce is the result of the accumulation of historical knowledge, every possibility of universality in Zhu's thought resides in the single comparison between China and the West. If universality in Croce's perspective is a realistic possibility resulting from the continuous efforts of historical studies, then in Zhu's perspective, it is only a utopian horizon that would emerge from the irreducible tension between the two cultures.

4. Conclusion:

Comparison in Gan Yang

Suspended between the two radically different aesthetic systems, Zhu's comparative poetics had to conduct what Jameson calls an allegorical reading of the text in order to determine the so-called "Chinese aesthetics" that constitutes China's cultural identity. Here, the Chinese Classics functioned as "national allegories," and his project of reading them was driven by a utopian desire to bring about

“Chinese modernity.” To conclude this paper, I would like to refer to an elaboration of this problematic of comparison by Gan Yang [甘阳] (born 1952), one of the leading new-generation cultural critics in the 1980s.

In a paper published in 1985, Gan Yang proposed a theoretical framework characterizing the so-called “Chinese Cultural Fever” [中国文化热] and the “Boom of the China-West Comparison” [中西比较风] of the 1980s. In this paper, Gan, while contextualizing these intense cultural phenomena as a historical task that began in the May Fourth era, argues that the most essential problem in the comparison between China and the West is not concerned with geographical differences between the two cultures, but with comparison between traditional and contemporary Chinese cultures.²⁵ By arguing this way, Gan suggests a different temporality—historicity—in order to explore the question of “Chinese modernity.” Referring to Martin Buber (1878–1965), Gan argues,

Therefore, tradition is “something that is not yet determined.” It is eternally in the process of production and creation, and opens toward the future an unlimited possibility, or the “possible world.” This is precisely why tradition can never simply be equaled to “something that already existed in the past,” but on the contrary, tradition in the first place means “something that can emerge in the future.”²⁶

Gan’s discussion thus revisits and further elaborates Zhu Guangqian’s problematic of comparison and tradition, by considering tradition to be what should be “produced” in the future through interpretations. Gan thus attempts to consider modernity not simply in a chronologi-

25. “[D]ifferences between traditional Chinese culture and contemporary Chinese culture are the problem of most importance and priority in the cultural discussion; geographical differences between the two cultures are of secondary importance and priority. It is not until we put emphasis on the former problem that we can conduct the China-West comparison in a better way” (Gan Yang, “Bashi Niandai de Wenhua Taolun de Jige Wenti” [八十年代的文化讨论的几个问题], in *Women zai Chuangzao Chuantong* [我们在创造传统] [Taipei: Lianjing Chubanshiye Gongsi, 1989], 45).

26. *Ibid.*, 55.

cal perspective of the separation from the past and the progress toward the future, but in terms of the production of the future by means of the reinterpretation of the past.

From this perspective, the present, in which this interpretative practice is conducted, is in the first place totally separated from the past, and “our existence in the ‘present’ is also purely a sort of contingent existence [偶然的存在].”²⁷ This radically “contingent” present, where one does not have any kind of established historical or geographical perspective, is the only placeless place for comparative hermeneutics; and it is only there that *utopia* can reside. The comparative hermeneutic programs of both Zhu and Gan, each based in different “present,” are deeply driven by a utopian desire to culturally transform Chinese society, and thus establish “Chinese modernity.” And from my standpoint, this comparative hermeneutics is an ongoing utopian program in our postmodern era of globalization, without which “utopia” would just become this or that variant of the bourgeois-bohemian way of life.²⁸

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27. *Ibid.*, 52.

28. Cf. David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

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