

Linking Ancient and Contemporary

Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literature

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What's the Link Between the Lyrical and Modernity in China?

A Discussion on Chinese Lyrical Modernity

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Abstract ‘Chinese lyrical modernity’ is an important concept that David Der-wei Wang has put forth in his writing and which follows on his famous theory of ‘repressed modernities in late Qing fiction.’ The way Wang approaches the concept and builds his argument can be traced directly to the work of Chen Shixiang, Kao Yu-kung and others who were well known in the United States and Taiwan for their studies on the lyrical tradition in Chinese classical literature. At the same time, Wang’s theory tackles the same questions that were raised by Prusek, Hsia Chih-tsing, Leo Ou-fan Lee and others on the lyrical and the epic. Wang sought to reconstruct the ‘structure of feeling’ in modern Chinese culture, by merging the notion of a ‘late-Qing modernity’ with the age-old ‘Chinese lyrical tradition’. In doing so, Wang leads us into the inner workings of Chinese thoughts and feelings, where these thoughts and feelings can be seen as the observations made by Chinese scholars outside China on the current prevailing trends in research, such as ‘multi-culturalism’ and ‘post-theories’, as well as cultural studies in the West in general. Although Wang inevitably faced a series of challenges and ran the risk of falling into various traps when using the Western concept of ‘the lyric’ to narrate the ‘lyrical tradition’ in classical Chinese literature, or when employing the antithesis between ‘the lyrical’ and ‘the epic’ to study modern Chinese history, his concept of ‘Chinese lyrical modernity’ has its own unique values and makes a significant contribution to the field.

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Keywords Lyricism. Chinese modernity. Chineseness. Historical consciousness of the lyrical.

1 Introduction

Following on the observations he made in his previous book, «Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction», David Wang Der-wei’s most recent work, which rethinks the various manifestations of Chinese modernity from the vantage point of lyricism, continues to stir debate in the academic field. Yet the lyrical, or lyricism, as defined by Wang, does not adhere to the typical understanding of those terms as a form of literary style or aesthetics; instead, their meaning has been broadened to include and to

point towards a form of cultural politics. In Wang's words, «lyricism can be defined as belonging to a certain literary genre and, especially in the Western context, lyricism is closely linked to poetry and the expression of an individual's emotions. Yet in the broader context, lyricism can embody a form of expression, a form of aesthetics, a practice in daily life and perhaps, in a more thought-provoking way, a form of engaging in conversation with politics» (Wang 2010, p. 72). Wang's core ideas, in defining lyricism this way, sought to reconstruct the modern emotive structure of Chinese literature. More importantly, Wang also drew on the work of the Marxist literary scholar Jaroslav Prusek and sought to rethink how lyricism in the Chinese literary tradition might be brought into a modern era of literature. In his view, it may be too simple to interpret the rise of modern Chinese literature as the linear evolution from the lyrical to the epic, as suggested by Prusek, Wang argued that lyricism could also be used as a powerful political expression of modern Chinese intellectuals. Therefore, he proposed that through rethinking the complex between lyricism and modern Chinese literature, one could open up a new field of study aimed at acquiring a better understanding of Chinese modernity. (Ji 2008, p. 6).

To a literary scholar, applying the principles of cultural studies means challenging established paradigms. One cannot help but ask if the term 'lyrical', as used by Wang, belongs to the field of literature, philosophy or political studies. To put it more specifically, using the terms 'lyrical' and 'lyricism' in literary criticism is a tradition that has prevailed throughout the past and present, yet their a-historical quality is constantly 'historicised' by Wang in his works when he employs those terms. We need to ask: is there a way to define 'lyricism' as belonging to a kind of style, a form of aesthetics, a way of life or a form of cultural politics? Is 'lyricism' related to what Jameson meant by the 'political unconscious'? Is the term related to Raymond Williams' 'Structure of Feeling' or to Foucault's use of 'discourse and power'? Or perhaps, does 'lyricism' simply refer to a unique kind of 'Chinese experience' that can never be described using Western knowledge, theories and concepts? I suggest that in order to answer the questions above, we need to know the context in which Wang proposed his theory on lyricism and the way he approached and constructed his argument.

2 'Lyrical' (*shuqing* 抒情) and 'Modern' (*xiandai* 现代)

To a scholar in mainland China, the notion of a 'lyrical modernity' is largely unheard of. However, in the study of Chinese literature as undertaken by scholars outside China, it is understandable that Wang proposes his theory on lyricism. In fact, the way Wang approached the question and constructed his argument can be traced to the arguments made by Chen

Shixiang, Kao Yu-kung and others who were well known in the United States and Taiwan for their work on the lyrical tradition in classical Chinese literature. At the same time, Wang's theory underscores the same concern that was raised by Prusek, Hsia Chih-ting, Leo Ou-fan Lee and others in their writings on the lyrical and the epic.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese academics Chen Shixiang and Kao Yu-kung were among the first few to propose the notion of a lyrical tradition in China. In his tenure at the University of California at Berkeley, Chen published a number of books that applied the study of comparative literature to literature from China and the West. Chen observed that the roots of Western literature could be traced to the epic poems of Homer and to classical Greek comedy and tragedy. He added that «unlike the West, Chinese literature did not glorify epic poems; its best works can be found in the lyrical poems where words are like music and (speak in) the inner voice of the individual, thereby establishing the lyrical tradition. All literary tradition in Chinese literature can be read as a lyrical tradition» (Chen 2008, pp. 2-6). Chen even suggested that this lyrical tradition was predominant in Chinese culture and stood in contrast to the powerful narrative tradition in Western literature. Chen's theory was developed by Kao Yu-kung at Princeton University, where he continued to apply the study of comparative literature in an attempt to affirm the lyrical tradition of Chinese literature. Kao further incorporated different Western theories and eventually broke new ground in the field of classical Chinese literature and culture. Kao's greatest achievement was to create an interdisciplinary approach in which he tried to explain the lyrical tradition as the root of Chinese culture and its applicability across different regimes in Chinese history. He created a system where Chinese classical literature was the gateway to understanding classical Chinese culture. As quoted in Wang's works, «Kao's contribution was to build a coherent world view using the lyrical tradition; the lyrical was a form of literature, then it became a genre, a lifestyle, a cultural perspective, a value system and even a political ideology» (Wang 2010, p. 13). Kao was hailed as a forerunner when he established a theory of the lyrical tradition in Chinese literature, which would have an impact on subsequent studies of Chinese literature in the West, as well as in Taiwan, for the next ten years. The immediate impact was that scholars in the West, who were formulating a new theory in order to re-think the European tradition in Western literature, looked upon the notion of the lyrical tradition put forth by Kao as a sort of inspiration. At the same time, Kao returned to teach for a year at the National Taiwan University in the late 1970s, inspiring a series of research papers written by fellow Taiwanese scholars who actively sought to dialogue with Kao on his theory. In the early 1980s, a flurry of publications by young scholars in Taiwan continued to discuss Kao's theory, testifying to the strong influence Kao had in Taiwan and to the rapid growth in popularity

of his theory in the academic field. This was also the period in which Leo Lee and David Wang were pursuing their university degrees in literature, which helps to explain why the theory of a lyrical tradition was nothing unusual to either of them.

The term 'lyrical' first became a topic in research on modern Chinese literature overseas when Leo Lee came across Prusek's article. As one of the best-known academics in the field of Sinology, Prusek published a number of important works on modern Chinese literature. One of his most important essays, «Subjectivism and Individualism in Modern Chinese Literature» (1957, Lee 2010, pp. 1-26), delved into the works of Lu Xun, Mao Dun, Yu Daifu and other modern Chinese authors, and observed in their literary works a writing style that was new to Chinese novels and which marked the start of a narrative tradition in modern Chinese literature between 1919 and 1937. Prusek's article was generally seen as having provided a panoramic view of modern Chinese literature. Lee, having studied under Prusek and also having an interest in «the romantic generation of modern Chinese writers», used the terms 'lyrical' and 'epic' to summarise the core themes of Prusek's 1957 article, while also pointing out that the terms stood in contrast to each other. Lee added that the lyrical tends to be displayed in the writer's choice of style, in a preference for subjectivity, in an individual's emotions or creative expressions. Epic, on the other hand, tends to be an adjective and not a noun, and is defined by Prusek as being applicable not only to poems but to all genres of literature. Thus, epic stood in contrast to lyrical and is seen as having different artistic approaches to portraying reality/society in literature. As such, the lyrical quality in the novels written by Yu Daifu and Lu Xun will strike one as being similar to poetry; the panoramic, objective style adopted by Mao Dun in his novels is said to display an epic quality (Lee 1987, pp. 3-4). Of course, Lee might have read too much into Prusek's meaning; in fact, the lyrical and the epic were never the core themes of Prusek's 1957 article, nor were they ever presented as a dichotomy or in opposition to one another. The only use of the term epic was in Prusek's description of Mao Dun (Lee 2010, p. 6) and it was not frequently cited in Prusek's article. Yet Lee had a preference for applying simple dichotomy in his analysis. In 1979, Lee also named the collection of essays by Prusek that he edited, *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature*. This publication was translated into Chinese in 2010 and, following Lee's rise to fame as one of the leading overseas scholars in modern Chinese literature, the dichotomy proposed by Lee gradually became accepted as the norm. To quote As Wang notes, Lee studied under T.A. Hsia and he was exceptionally close to Hsia Chih-tsing. When at Harvard, Lee also studied under Prusek. Lee is a disciple of the three most important scholars in modern Chinese literature, and his works are among the most significant to have emerged in recent times» (Wang 2009, p. 2).

To a certain extent, Wang's iteration of 'Chinese Lyricism and Modernity' came from a long tradition, as laid out above, and it can be seen as the fruits of the work done by scholars in the West whose focus was on Chinese literature. However, the bold move made by Wang was to propose a theory that could cut across classical and modern Chinese literature. When comparing Wang's work to that of Chen Shixiang's or Kao Yu-kung's, Wang stressed the possibility of the lyrical tradition being carried on into the modern era. Unlike Lee, Wang found a way to trace the roots of lyricism to culture and politics, thus adding these two dimensions to any form of meaningful literary criticism (one might want to make) on the style of modern Chinese literature.

For Wang, 'Lyricism and Chinese Modernity', or in simpler terms, the Chinese 'lyrical tradition', was a modern mode of expression. Wang commented that 'lyricism' was not unlike revolution and enlightenment, as it is a modern approach to representing modern Chinese literature and the construction of a modern entity. As opposed to Lu Xun and his disciples, who proclaimed realism as the only true approach in writing modern Chinese literature, Wang held that 'lyricism' was just as legitimate an approach in modern Chinese literature. Wang was adamant in pointing out that he believed in continuing with his theory of lyrical tradition, and even added that the modern tradition of the lyrical and lyricism clearly developed from the pre-modern era (and from classical Chinese literature). He asked, «how do we set and use the classical lyrical tradition in a modern context: what is its role in modern literature and in the socio-cultural life of modern times? How can we (re)imagine its continuity, its (re)development and its meanings?» (Wang 2010, p. 82).

3 'Lyrical' and 'China'

The validity of Wang's observation depended on his system of values and the legitimacy of the theories that he chose to turn to. Ironically, in the field of classical Chinese literature, the debate over a lyrical tradition continues to the present day, with doubters questioning the applicability of 'lyrical' or 'lyricism', which first began as a Western concept related to poetry, and its ability to encompass the complex aesthetics, the politics and the culture of China. Before Wang can answer how the lyrical is 'modern', he first needs to answer how the lyrical is 'a quintessential aspect of China'.

In 2005, the Taiwanese scholar Huang Jinshu wrote an important essay on 'Lyricism in China', in which he defined lyricism and its significance to the field of academic history. In Huang's opinion, lyricism in China can be read as a kind of 'Grand Narrative' that has, since the extensive exploration and research carried out by Chen Shixiang and Kao Yu-kung, matured over time to become a well-established modern paradigm that can

be readily applied to attempts at re-writing Chinese literary history or to debates in philosophy and aesthetics. Kao, especially, «gave the theory a much needed boost by analysing the lyrical tradition in classical Chinese literature through linguistics, poetics, aesthetics and history. In doing so, fellow scholars in classical Chinese literature could then readily link topics in philosophy and aesthetics to classical Chinese literature through this paradigm. The lyrical tradition also provided the logic as to why poetry was generally understood as the predominant form of expression in Chinese literature and culture». In the view of Huang Jinshu, «notions of the lyrical tradition in classical Chinese literature are just as important as the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the academic world. It is a modern paradigm that would revive and underscore the importance of classical literature as one of the impetuses to modern Chinese literature, aside from the May Fourth enlightenment» (Huang 2010, pp. 157-185).

Huang's observations were based on the approach of a 'modern construct' in which he placed the 'lyrical tradition' of Chinese literature in a theoretical structure and explained its historical context; yet, the lyrical tradition is an 'invention of tradition' (to use the words of E.J. Hobsbawm) that aims to provide an alternative to the idea of a modernity brought about by the May Fourth vernacular literature movement. «Those things which claimed to be from an old tradition generally became known as traditional from a not-too-distant period, at times, it's even invented» (Hobsbawm 2010, p. 1). In discussing modernity, comparative literature analysis aims to present the differences between cultures and, in the same vein, the idea of a 'Chinese lyricism' was created to be a kind of 'otherness' that could be deemed an alternative to the Western narrative. Evidently, Huang's method of deconstructing the Chinese lyrical tradition was influenced by New Historicism. Huang felt that one could legitimately suggest that the lyrical was the at the core of Chinese classical literature because, in his mind, classical Chinese literature was something that would effectively challenge one to reflect on the well-established May Fourth modern literature paradigm. All along, the grand narrative of the rise of the May Fourth literary movement views the complex world of classical Chinese literature as a simple, singular system. Acting in the name of science and enlightenment, a preference for histories to all else, the rigid enforcement of the vernacular, and the decline of classical language: all of these can be found at the moment in which modern Chinese literature was born. This is why it is very difficult for the classical Chinese tradition to find common ground with modern Chinese literature, as there is simply no room for it. As Huang writes, «classical Chinese literature had to belong to the ancient literary traditions, as it is not compatible with the modern mode of expression nor and there is no strong argument to suggest the contrary. It has no grand narratives of its own that could compete with the paradigm of modern vernacular literature» (Huang 2005, pp. 157-

185). Here, then, Huang believed that the 'Chinese lyrical tradition' would eventually be a kind of grand narrative that could affirm the importance of classical Chinese literature. Moreover, his theory is very much akin to how comparative literature works in the West in presenting differences and questioning the construction of identity between East-West cultural spheres. Those who worked in this field were generally comfortable with applying the techniques of a comparative world-view.

Yet the question that one should ask is whether comparative literature as a modern academic subject is a Western approach that seeks to explain the nature of the lyrical in Chinese literature. Although it is politically correct to apply a Western approach in an attempt to uncover the particularism of a non-Western subject, applying a Western approach because one assumes that this approach is a universal one can be dangerous. Just as Naoki Sakai has pointed out, while the approach is used to seek the particularism of a non-Western subject, the ultimate aim can also be seen as trying to locate something that would eventually lead to universal truths. In the article by Naoki Sakai, «those who claim a world of universalism and those who claim a world of particularism believed that they are not the same. Yet both worlds reinforce and complement each other, they do not negate one another; instead, they need to build a relationship that would allow them to strike a balance. They need to avoid a clash, a clash that, once it occurs, would topple both worlds. Ironically, both worlds were already flawed, and though they tried hard to point fingers at each other's flaws, they were silent accomplices. In other words, even if a nation were to rely on a world of particularism to assert its position, it need not necessarily reject a world of universalism or criticise it in a serious way» (Naoki 1999, p. 396).

What Naoki Sakai is saying is that the subject of modernity belongs to both a system of universalism and a system of particularism, and a unique or particular phenomenon (such as Chinese modernity) need not always negate the possibility of being universal. In fact, to be universal, one first begins as something unique. This unique subject matter would eventually be universal and, inevitably, most universal truths generally seek to encompass all unique responses. Without a compilation of a variety of unique responses, it is hard to establish a universal truth.

Following this logic, if a 'Chinese lyrical tradition' was proposed as a unique tradition that stood in opposition to the universal notion of a Western narrative tradition, this observation should be considered a product of comparative literature made by American scholars such as Chen Shixiang and Kao Yu-kung. Nonetheless, why would we believe that this notion of a unique Chinese tradition could in fact surpass the current Western understanding of China, given that the observation was first made through application of a Western theory (i.e. comparative literature)?

In emphasizing the fictional nature of a 'Chinese lyrical tradition', Gong Pengcheng boldly pointed out that this theory was, in fact, not a truthful

observation about Chinese literature; rather, it was a product of the cultural anxiety that was prevalent during a specific period of time in Taiwan. When encounters between the East and West were becoming more and more common, academics in Taiwan gradually lost their interest in applying Western theories and went back to focusing on the roots of Chinese tradition. As a result, when scholars of comparative literature in Taiwan commented on certain literary styles in Chinese literature, their aims were no longer to seek a common ground with Western literary styles. Instead, they sought to emphasize the differences; this notion of «culture at its roots was always unique» was not unlike what Yip Wai-lim had described. In Gong's article, «The Chinese Lyrical Tradition Does Not Exist», he pointed out that the theory of a lyrical tradition does not come from Chen Shixiang or Kao Yu-kung. He felt that «the lyrical tradition should be rooted in Taiwanese culture but that it was subsequently used to resolve several other problems» (Gong 2008, p. 8). Gong added that the growth and flourishing of the lyrical tradition was accepted as representing a social consensus only in Taiwan and inevitably was a product unique to Taiwan. In Gong's opinion, the 'Chinese lyrical tradition' is solely representative of Taiwan and could only answer questions concerning Taiwan, and nowhere else.

Interestingly, if we accept the proposals made by Huang Jinshu and Gong Pengcheng, who labeled the 'lyrical tradition' as being not an objective observation but a modern 'invention', Wang's question is no longer relevant. As a modern construct, Wang's theory eventually becomes pointless. However, if we are searching for answers in the Foucauldian way (in the field of epistemology), then we might ask: If the proposal of a lyrical tradition in classical Chinese literature reflected the consensus and mentality of the 'mainstream intellectuals' in Taiwan, might we not ask Wang the same question? That is, how does the theory of a 'modern Chinese lyricism' reflect Wang's mindset and the contemporary society he lived in?

4 Multiple Modernities

As a research topic, 'lyricism in Chinese modernity' has grown in importance due to the rise of cultural pluralism in the West. As a result, 'multiple modernities' or 'plural forms of modernity' are acceptable. The issue of a 'Chinese modernity' can be traced to the rise of 'post-ism', cultural studies or critical theories of the contemporary world which sought to re-think the Western tendency to explain all phenomena as attesting to certain universal truths. In the field of Chinese studies, the gradual shift from Fairbanks's 'impact-response model' to Cohen's 'Discovering history in China' compels one to stop thinking about Chinese modernity through the East-West relationship and to search for the Chinese path to modernity

by looking at Chinese culture and tradition. The emergence of a 'late-Qing modernity' should be understood against this backdrop. Wang observed that the late-Qing novels that he was reading were different from those interpreted by Lu Xun, Hu Shi and Chen Ping Yuan. Wang defined the late Qing period as starting from the mid-19th century, «a 60-year period following the establishment of the Taiping Regime and ending in the last year of the Qing dynasty» (Wang 2005, p. 1). In doing so, Wang enlarged the scope of late-Qing novels clearly in order to explain that even before the intrusion of the West, an emergent form of Chinese literary modernity had already taken root in China. Wang sought to initiate his discussion from the late-Qing era and his aim was to assess the ability of classical Chinese literature to regenerate itself and progress towards modernity. Wang believed that the point of intersection between East and West during the May Fourth period need not necessarily be the only factor in the birth of Chinese modernity.

However, Wang was not alone in his quest to trace the beginnings of Chinese modernity. As early as the 1930s, Zhou Zhuoren had already pointed out that modern Chinese literature should include works from the 'late Ming'. In one of his articles, Zhou commented that the Gong-an pai and Jing-lin pai literature of late Ming should be seen as the forerunner of New Literature. In recent times, it has become increasingly popular for scholars in the various social sciences to turn to the classical China era to explain the country's path to modernity. Instead of 'discovering the history of China' from the 'May-Fourth' period onward, there were those who believed that one should turn to late Qing or even late Ming. The most extreme example, however, is the Japanese scholar Christian Uhl. According to Christian Uhl, 'contemporaneity' (rather than modernity) in China can be traced to the Song dynasty. He added that China experienced an internal contemporary development, which is different from a contemporary development that is imposed by an outside power. As a result, the birth of a contemporary Chinese society should be seen as starting from the mid-16th century. It is misleading to think that the outbreak of the Opium War in 1840 marks the birth of contemporary China (a consequence of the invasion by Western powers), and such a Eurocentric approach in dividing up Chinese history does not do justice to the internal contemporary development in China (Mizoguchi 1996, 1997 and 2002).

Wang was a step ahead when he merged the notion of a 'late-Qing modernity' into the age-old 'Chinese lyrical tradition'; in doing so, Wang also deconstructed the linear development of non-Western societies' paths to modernity and perhaps even the notion of 'modernity' itself. When he talks about late-Qing modernity as something that has risen from the «regenerative powers of classical Chinese literary traditions» (Wang 2005, p. 38), it is clear that he is referring to the 'Chinese lyrical tradition'. Wang affirms the prominence of traditional Chinese culture and this explains why he

chose to merge Chen Shixiang's and Kao Yu-kung's theories into his own. One cannot help but to expect more when Li Zehou's notion of 'Emotion Noumenon' somehow coincided with Wang's notion of an 'affective China' (Wang 2010, p. 63).

To avoid being accused of particularism, Wang differentiated the lyrical in 'Chinese lyricism' from its Western definition. In his numerous works that discuss 'Chinese lyricism',¹ each article begins with a chapter on 'affective history' and stresses its affinity with the 'lyrical tradition' in classical Chinese literature. Wang pointed out that «Jonathan Arac is of the view that the 'lyrical' in Western literature tends to be associated with individualism, its birth is a very recent one and it is linked to a form of expression associated with Romanticism. But in the context of Chinese literature, the 'lyrical' has a broader meaning and it is affiliated with historical narratives from classical times» (Wang 2011, p. 2). «Because the Chinese lyrical tradition is a traceable and regenerative tradition, it is able to continue into the modern era. Our understanding of Chinese lyricism and modernity should not be restricted just to its being associated with Romanticism in Western literature» (2011, pp. 41-42). «In fact, the core of the Chinese lyrical tradition is never solely about the expression of an individual (as in Romanticism); literary works may talk about one's ambition, one's emotions, but they were never meant to be a private or internal dialogue. Moreover, the writing styles *xing* 兴, *guan* 观, *qun* 群, *yuan* 怨 though lyrical in approach,² already entail a complex dialogue in politics, values, aesthetics and more» (2011, p. 72).

Clearly, Wang has redefined the 'lyrical' to be more than just something that was defined under Western Romanticism as having a subjective nature; instead, he proposed that even in the highly individualistic expression of thoughts exemplified in Chinese literature, one could find some innate reflections on history or the ruling regime. Just as Raymond Williams talks about the 'structure of feeling', Wang believed that the 'traditional'

1 Currently, the Chinese editions include: *Shuqing chuantong yu zhong guo xian daixing* 抒情传统与中国现代性 (The Lyrical Tradition and Chinese Modernity) (2010) and *Xiandai shuqing chuantong silun* 现代抒情传统四论 (Four Essays on the Modern Lyrical Tradition). An English edition is in preparation.

2 The idea that poetry «serves to stimulate the mind [...] may be used for purposes of self-contemplation, [...] teach the art of sociability, [...] show how to regulate feelings of resentment» (Legge 1971, p. 323) was proposed by the ancient Chinese thinker Confucius to explain the social functions of poetry. Confucius believes that poetry has four functions, namely, *xing*, *guan*, *qun* and *yuan*. *Xing* refers to how the artistic images of poetry could serve to arouse the spiritual excitement of the readers and lead the readers to appreciate and enjoy the beauty of poetry. *Guan* refers to how poetry reflects social, political and moral trends authentically and allows the readers to observe the gains and losses of government and the rise and fall of social custom. *Qun* refers to poetry's ability to allow for emotional interactions and strengthen the unity of the people. *Yuan* refers to the function of literary writings that aims at intervening with real world issues and engaging in social critics.

is connotative of the 'lyrical' and, these two concepts 'somehow echo each other' (2011, pp. 19-20).

The Hong Kong scholar Chan Kwok Kou Leonard has a different opinion from that of the Taiwanese Huang Jinshu. Chan does not see the 'Chinese lyrical tradition' as a 'product of Taiwan' or as a literary trend of thought that sprang up only in Taiwan. He pointed out that even before Chen Shixiang, Lin Geng had made the same observation, and that his elders mentors, such as Wen Yiduo, Zhu Ziqing and others, share similar views, including the idea that 'Chinese literary tradition' should be viewed as a literary trend of thought that was rooted in China. Lin Geng, Wen Yiduo, and Zhu Ziqing believed that 'poetry' could transcend all genres and forms, that it could be merged into other genres and that it was the highest form of expression in Chinese literature. In other words, a 'lyrical tradition' begins with the 'lyric', it extends into lyricism, lyricality and eventually a kind of lyric aesthetics (Chan 2007, pp. 332-337). Chan's observation puts the epistemology of 'Chinese lyrical tradition' in a modern context, where Chinese intellectuals were in fact seeking a (re)understanding of their own identity, through lyricism, at a time of crisis due to the rise of Western imperialism in China. Yet Chan's opinion is not unlike Wang's, in that they both believe in the transcendent nature of the lyrical.

Wang picked five modern Chinese intellectuals, namely Zhou Zuoren, Liang Zongdai, Zhu Guangqian, Zong Baihua and Shen Congwen, when he discussed modernity and Chinese lyricism. He pointed out that intellectuals such as Zhu Guangqian and Zong Baihua lived through a period which advocated the new and the modern. Some of them also travelled overseas to further their studies, and those who remained at home were nonetheless engrossed in Western philosophy and aesthetics. «When these men 'looked back' in time to search for inspiration in the Chinese lyrical tradition, their efforts, I thought, were not to express a yearning for the traditional, but rather were a feeble attempt to express themselves in modern times - because with the new, contemporary Western resources that they now enjoyed, there is a certain limitation and, thus, their turning back to the traditional is an effort to continue a meaningful dialogue with present modernity» (Wang 2010, p. 36).

In an age where pluralism is 'politically correct', the value of 'modernity in Chinese lyricism' is undeniably attractive. The biggest challenge for Wang is, how do we apply the concept of a 'lyrical modernity' in re-writing Chinese literary history? How do we historicize 'the lyrical' or 'lyricism'? Wang sought to break new ground and break from the prevalent concepts of politics, revolution and enlightenment in reading modern Chinese literature, and to create a whole new theoretical understanding of modern China through lyricism and modernity in Chinese literature. To do so, Wang pins his hopes on Chen Yinge, Zhu Guangqian, Zong Baihua, Qu Qiubai, Hu Feng, Qian Zhongshu, Zhou Zhuoren,

Shen Congwen, Zhang Ailing, Hu Lancheng, Jiang Wen-ye, Tai Jingnong and others who once clearly belonged to the camps of 'enlightenment' or 'revolution'. Thus Wang is stuck in a situation where he first has to switch camps and establish new theories revolving around the interpretation of those authors' works.

At the same time, Wang had to turn to 'individualism' when he defined the core of 'lyricism', adding that «lyricism is the discovery of the individual and the expression of one's desires; the turn to epic is a collective cry for help and a unifying force propelling one towards revolution. Based on this, the lyrical and the epic are not just genres, they are an extension, a mode of expression, an emotive function, an approach to interpreting socio-political reality. In Prusek's view, choosing between epic and lyrical are both means for the Chinese individual to understand a modern era. In modern Chinese history, it should rightfully be recorded how the (modern) individual was first discovered and then affirmed as an individual who chose to be absorbed into collectivism. It was a move from the lyrical to the epic» (Jin 2008, p. 5). In another article, Wang continued his argument, writing that «Zhou Zhuoren and Lu Xun, the Zhou brothers, actually shared a common view that the lyrical, at its most basic, evolves from an independent individual. It is a voice, an ambition that can be traced to the individual author yet, at the same time, it speaks of enlightenment, social values, revolution and other concerns of contemporary society. It also speaks of a particular view of history that is unique in every individual» (2008, p. 8). Nonetheless, Wang is not satisfied with creating a dichotomy with his concept of 'modernity and Chinese lyricism', where the individual is always in opposition to the political. Wang believes that more could be encompassed by the concept of 'individuality' in Western theories, and he uses these words to describe what 'Chinese lyrical modernity' should ideally be:

What I wish to emphasize is that every time we discuss the Enlightenment or Romanticism in Western theories, it generally revolves around the subject of individuality. For those who are familiar with Chinese literature, the 'lyrical' or 'lyricism' which is encompassed by literature from the late Qing and May Fourth far surpass that of Western understanding. 'Lyricism' is not only a literary style, it points towards an ideology, a form of epistemology, a set of emotive symbols, a way of mimicking real life, and much more. In a way, 'lyricism' is far more capable of expressing a complex system of emotions than are the Enlightenment or Romanticism. Moreover, if Western theories seek to set up the objective and subjective world, 'lyricism' seeks to break down the boundary between these two worlds. The reflections made by May Fourth scholars such as Wang Guowei, Zhu Guangqian and Zong Baihua were precisely to break down boundaries and their reflections enriched the possibilities of modern Chinese literature. Chen Shixiang, Shen Congwen, Kao

Yu-gong, on the other hand, pay homage to the Chinese lyrical tradition, never stopping to ponder the question of modernity in Chinese literature. (Wang 2011, p. 5)

If we look at the various writings by Wang on the topic of 'Chinese lyrical modernity' and group them into one single argument, we see that Wang provides multiple case studies to narrate the depth of his theory, though he never pauses to think how the various case studies might somehow appear mismatched with certain elements that have been proposed in his theory. From this perspective, the crux of Wang's 'lyrical tradition' is never about its lineage or its subsequent development. Yet in his discussion on the various lyrical aspects of Chinese literature, Wang is careful to place it in its specific historical context. At the same time, however, he wants to tell us how it might shed light on an alternative understanding of history. Wang never fails to carry out a close reading of the subjective voice and pick out the quality that lends durability to literature across time and space. He created a 'democratic' system wherein multiple meanings can co-exist at the same time without conflict, and the 'lost voices/orphans' no longer lurk at the edge of the 'greater narrative'. As a result, under the banner of a 'lyrical tradition' everything can be seamlessly brought together to become one 'imagined community'. Those who are capable of 'lyrical expression' could ultimately create a realm of 'heteroglossia' that would add meanings to existing ones and also subscribe to truths which would otherwise remain hidden. Just as Wang describes the musician Jiang Wenye:

He (referring to Jiang Wenye) aspired to create a kind of never-before-heard music and he did it in a poignant moment of history with success - success which is measured in terms of how well he managed to play his loud music and ultimately make it heard over the predominant noises in society [...] his example shows how, in times when everyone wanted only epic pieces, the 'lyrical tradition' is found in the imagination to crave something different, to steel oneself to face the risks one must face in order to remain faithful to one's cause [...] yet ironically, because Jing's nationalism was questioned, and because he chose to remain aloof in times of national crises, the lyricism that Jiang valorizes is a fragile one. (Wang 2011, pp. 135-139)

In this description by Wang, he deliberately added a dose of 'tragic element' to Jiang's lyricism, and cleverly obscured much of the conflict which might have arisen from the way Jiang limited lyricism in the face of real-life situations. In some sense, if one chose to 'betray the politics of reality', one could never emerge as the real victor in history; yet the loser is 'condoned' and considered a winner for his bold act to 'betray or revolt against' the 'brutal politics of reality'.

However, if Wang seeks only to reflect history through the lens of those who succeeded in the face of failure, his 'underdog mentality' was more emotional than practical. He reversed the established paradigms that 'only the winner has the last word' to 'only the loser has the last word', and I cannot help but ask if this is not something that the Left has always enforced on its believers: that is, if one must always 'stand by the weakest class in society', would the result not be that only the weakest class in society can claim to have the only legitimate voices, concerns and needs? To a certain extent, the notion of a 'Chinese lyrical modernity' is perhaps more suited to a meaningful discourse on the topic of 'revolution lyricism' which Wang disapproves of. When Wang seeks to discredit the narrative of revolution in 20th century China or calls 'revolution lyricism' something that belongs to Romanticism and to the Western world, I do not think Wang is likely to succeed in persuading me to share his view. As posited in the works of Lin Yusheng, which Wang is familiar with, the source of a new mentality, one that could completely 'revolutionize' China, will always come from within. And who knows, it might be somewhat attached to the 'lyrical tradition', but not quite in its entirety.

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