

Pre-modern literary theories, India, China, Europe: Abstracts

Ipshita Chanda, Dept of Comparative Literature & India Studies, The English & Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad: What to do with “ literary” theory?

What to do with literary theory, especially when it is designated as Pre-modern, i.e. when the ideas of the literary and of theory as such may not resonate with our contemporary concerns? Is it legitimate to take the reconciliatory view, i.e. let us include everything that fell by the wayside in our bid to become modern, progressive and scientific? Or is it legitimate to graft the present onto the past and do psychoanalytic readings of Sita? In taking either of these positions, and the “methods” that follow, are we forgetting that theories are no less historically and culturally located than cultural productions themselves - that the existential activity of understanding alterity inflects our relations with the world of others, whether they are located elsewhere, in other times or next door? These are the questions that I would consider in my participation in the workshop on Pre-modern literary theory from “ancient” scriptal-oral cultures of Asia and the not so ancient culture of west Europe which often sets the terms of debate, theories and categories for academia.

Saugata Bhaduri, English Department, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi: Key Concepts in Classical Sanskrit Poetics

This presentation will discuss some key theoretical concepts in classical Sanskrit poetics, like *sāhitya*, *rasa*, *bhāva*, *dhvani*, *vakrokti*, *rīti*, *aucitya*, *sahṛdayatā*, etc., and also try to compare them with corresponding European literary theoretical terms.

Heinz Günther Nesselrath, Classical Philology, Göttingen: Art imitating life –the theory of mimesis in Aristotle’s *Poetics*

Aristotle’s *Poetics* is the first still preserved philosophical work that exclusively focuses on literary theory. According to Aristotle, all literary genres discussed in the *Poetics* (epic, verse drama, and to a lesser extent, lyric) have come into being because of mimesis, which can be understood as a representation of nature, most of all human nature. While such mimesis is severely criticized by Aristotle’s teacher and predecessor Plato – according to Plato, the artist’s mimesis is twice removed from the truth and thus more or less worthless –, Aristotle has a much more positive attitude to mimesis: mimetic art can search for that which is everlasting. The paper will try to give a sketch of how Aristotle uses his concept of mimesis to formulate important features of his literary theory.

Katja Freise, Slavic Department and World Literature, Göttingen: The Metapoetic dimension in early sources of the fairy tale topic "Sleeping Beauty"

The lecture assumes that literary theories are not only explicitly formulated, but also implicitly embedded in literary texts, whereby the authors incorporate the theoretical background necessary for the understanding of their works on a metapoetic level. On the basis of Apuleius’ text *Cupid and Psyche*, it will be shown how fundamental theoretical assumptions are reflected in this text and what effects these assumptions have on the interpretation of the work. In addition, the extent to which the metapoetic dimension allows general statements to be made about literature and not just about specific aspects of the text will be analyzed.

Simi Malhotra, Jamia Millia Islamia Delhi, Dep. of English: ‘The Word as World: The Centrality of the ‘Literary’ in Sikh Theory’

In this workshop, aimed to compare 'pre-modern literary theories', including those emerging from India, I intend to focus my presentation on a study of Sikh philosophy, as elaborated in one of its earliest and most definitive texts, the Japji Sāhib. The presentation will look into what assumptions of epistemology, ontology, and ethics this text throws up vis-à-vis the primacy of the 'word', and hence of the 'literary', wherein the truth of the whole of the world is shown to be understandable through the 'word', and one can gain all knowledge through an exegesis of the 'word', and obedience to its linguistic authority. An

elaboration of this centrality accorded to the 'word' in Sikh philosophy will become the point of departure for my presentation of Sikh thought as an instance of what could be considered 'pre-modern Indian literary theory'.

Tatiana Kudriavtseva, Göttingen University, Slavic Department: Petrarch's Imitatio and the principle of equivalence

In one of his letters (Familiars XXIII, 19), Petrarch explains that the imitation of the great authors by the modern poet should aim at a hidden similarity rather than direct and obvious copying. As a result, the similarity between the original and the new text must be complex, recognisable only through an intellectual reading, i.e. through interpretation. At the same time, the similarity must also contain many dissimilar elements. Although two works show many different, opposite features on closer inspection, there is nevertheless a hard-to-define similarity between them that makes one immediately think of the other when reading one. In another of Petrarch's letters (Familiars I, 8) we can read that writers should write as bees make their honey: do not pick the individual flowers, but only extract the best from them in order to then produce something new and better from many different elements. In this sense imitatio became the inner principle of Petrarch's thinking and writing. The poetic skill that he extracted from antiquity found expression in all his writings. The principle described by Petrarch resembles the concept of equivalence, which was announced by Roman Jakobson in 1960 as the fundamental origin of poetry and the main criterion of poetic function. The principle of equivalence presupposes the simultaneous coexistence of two types of semantic relations - similarity and opposition of two elements. If these elements are whole texts, we can speak about the emergence of intertextual equivalence between them. At the same time, the very form of letters addressed by Petrarch to his literary predecessors and descendants determines the dialogical character of his art and allows us to speak about the formation of the beginnings of the principle of cultural metapoetics in his work. The presentation will examine and demonstrate, through the analysis of selected texts, how Petrarch's principle of imitatio is realised in the texts of his Canzoniere and what possibilities for interpretation are opened up when the principles of equivalent analysis are applied to them.

Xiaofang Shao, Chinese Department, East China Normal University, Shanghai: Toward a Vernacular Poetic Vision: Huang Zunxian and the Late Qing Vernacular Movement

The creation of a modern vernacular Chinese literature has often been asserted and assessed with reference to the degree of its extrication from the domination of Classical Chinese and traditional poetics. Yet is this the only way of accounting for the Chinese experience of literary vernacularization? Can vernacular literature be understood without subscribing to the agnostic narratives of the struggle between the classical and the colloquial languages, between traditional poetics and literary modernity? This paper responds to these questions by focusing on Huang Zunxian (1848–1905), the herald of the Chinese vernacular movement. Through an analysis of the poems collected in Huang's two poetry anthologies first published in 1879 and 1911, *Assorted Quatrains on Japan* and *Poetry From the Human Realm Studio*, this paper reveals the sophisticated interplay of Huang's attempt at a "vernacular poetic vision" and the genre of classical Chinese poetry. A seasoned emissary and a prolific poet of the late Qing dynasty, Huang Zunxian was the first to systematically advocate for consistency between writing and speech in China. He experimented with colloquial expressions and folk songs in poetry, especially in shi. The unprecedented amount of vernacular words rendered it impossible to read Huang's poems as, or to make them sound like, traditional poetry. However, with the structure of five- or seven-character lines and with loosely applied parallelism in rhyming, Huang's poems look fairly classical in form. Still more paradoxical is the prevalence of classic-style poetry in Huang's writings on overseas life. The more eye-opening his works were, the more startlingly they seem to lay bare the gaps between the poetic form and the vernacular, between traditional aesthetics and modern cultures. The paradoxical nature of Huang's vernacular-cum-classical poetry, therefore, constitutes a revealing occasion for exploring the dynamic between literary tradition and evolution, and between vernacular literature and modernity.

Xiaojing Wang, Göttingen University, World Literature: Investigating the theoretical Foundations of the AAXA rhyme scheme as the dominant pattern in Classical Chinese Poetry

This article investigates the literary-theoretical foundations of the AAXA rhyme scheme, which emerged as the dominant rhyming pattern in classical Chinese poetry. It seeks to uncover the deeper connections between this specific formal structure and broader principles in classical Chinese literary theory. Unlike in English and German poetry, where the AAXA scheme appears relatively infrequently and only in later periods, it was already in frequent use in *The Book of Songs* (Shijing) — the earliest known anthology of Chinese poetry, comprising 305 poems dating from the 11th to 6th centuries BCE. By the 7th century CE, AAXA had become one of the standard rhyme schemes employed in regulated verse forms such as *Jueju* and *Lüshi*, and went on to dominate the poetic tradition for over 1,500 years. The structure of AAXA — characterized by its asymmetrical pattern — does not neatly conform to the well-known philosophical ideals in traditional Chinese thought, such as symmetry, balance, and harmonic completion. What literary principles helped this rhyme pattern become dominant in Chinese poetry? This study observes that explicit theoretical discussion of the AAXA rhyme scheme is largely absent from classical Chinese treatises on poetics and prosody. Thus, the explanation for its literary centrality may lie not in narrowly defined prosodic theory but rather within broader conceptions of literature and aesthetics in early Chinese thought. This study approaches the topic from three theoretical perspectives — literary ontology, phonological aesthetics, and structural composition — to uncover the deeper connections between the AAXA rhyme scheme and the Chinese cultural understanding of what constitutes “good literature”.

Ksenia Kuzminykh, Göttingen University, Slavic Department: The Evolution of Metalepsis in East European and Western European Literature from the Middle Ages to the 18th Century: A Comparative and Typological Analysis

This study undertakes a systematic examination of the evolution of metalepsis within East European and Western European literary discourse from the medieval period through the eighteenth century. Grounded in narratological theory and historical poetics, the analysis delineates three principal categories of metalepsis – rhetorical, ontological, and performative and elucidates their shifting functions across temporal and generic transformations. The study argues that these narrative mechanisms not only reflect but also actively participate in broader developments in linguistic practice, literary form, and the emergence of authorial self-consciousness. The investigation is supplemented by a comparative perspective that situates the East European tradition alongside its Western European counterpart, enabling the identification of both transnational parallels and culturally specific inflections in the use of metaleptic strategies. East European texts examined include *Proglas* (9th century), the *Povest' vremennykh let* (ca. 850–1110; *The Tale of Bygone Years*), *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (ca. 1200; *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*), the early baroque *Povest' o Savve Grudcyne* (1666–1668; *The Tale of Savva Grudtsyn*), *Čulkov's Peresmešnik ili Slavyanskije skazki* (1783–1784; *The Mocker, or Slavic Tales*), *Sad božestvennykh pėsnej, prozjabšij iz zern svjaščennago pysanija* (1753–1785; *Garden of divine songs, sprouting from the seeds of Holy Scripture*) by Hryhorij Skovoroda, and *Vita et passio sancti Venceslai et sancte Ludmile ave eius* (end of the tenth century; *Life and Passion of St. Wenceslas and His Grandmother St. Ludmilla*; also known as *Christian's Legend*) (end of the tenth century). These texts reveal a progressive diversification of metaleptic modes, particularly in relation to evolving narrative authority and readerly engagement. In parallel, the Western European tradition offers illustrative points of convergence and divergence. Rhetorical metalepsis emerges prominently in the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* (1587), while ontological metalepsis is notably developed in *Grimmelshausen's Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1668), and Laurence Sterne's, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*,

Gentleman (1759–1767), wherein the narrative voice fluctuates between confessional, fictional, and metafictional registers. By foregrounding how metalepsis functions as a site of textual self-awareness and narrative transgression, the study illuminates its role in the emergence of modern literary consciousness in

Eastern and Central Europe. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of early modern narrative strategies and their intersections with evolving notions of fictionality, authority, and reader engagement.

Dandan Liang, Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, Comparative Literature: On the Hermeneutic Thoughts of Ouyang Xiu's Fundamental Significance of the Odes

This essay relates to the Confucian canonical studies and the hermeneutic transition in the Northern Song (960-1127). By centering on Ouyang Xiu, a leading politician, historian and classicist, and his exegesis on the Canon of the Odes as a case study, this essay shows how the new principles of understanding were established as an end to the "medieval reading" in the Confucian Canonical Studies, and how the rereading of the antiquity offered a way for the Song scholars to resume the culture and tradition of the Confucianism.

Jin Fan, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, Comparative literature: The research of Ancient Chinese Literary Criticism.

I will introduce into the research on ancient literary criticism by presenting the three most influential books on the topic: Chen Yinchu, *The Evolution of the Literary Enterprise: Lectures on the History of Ancient Chinese Literature*, Zhonghua Book Company, 2024; Wu Chengxue, *Studies on Ancient Chinese Stylistics*, Zhonghua Book Company, 2022; Zhang Bowei, *Research on Methods of Ancient Chinese Literary Criticism*, Zhonghua Book Company, 2002.

Fanke Wang, East China Normal University, Shanghai, Department of Comparative Literature, School of International Chinese Studies: The Extraordinary Event as a Core of Genre : Lu Xun's Study of Classical Chinese Narrative in the Perspective of Sino-German

This paper examines the role of the extraordinary event as a core principle in narrative form by comparing Lu Xun's theory of classical Chinese fiction with the German Novelle tradition. In his seminal work *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Lu Xun's discussion of Tang chuanqi (a form of fictional short story or novella in Classical Chinese first formed in the Tang dynasty) articulates a view of fiction that anticipates the modern concept of fictional prose narrative. He argues that chuanqi evolves from earlier zhiguai tales, marking a shift from crude anecdotal records to more literarily refined storytelling. Despite this evolution, both genres share a common feature: the focus on recording strange events and exceptional occurrences. In the German context, a comparable understanding is found in Goethe's definition of the Novelle as "an unheard-of event" (*eine sich ereignete unerhörte Begebenheit*), emphasizing the genre's reliance on narrative novelty and abnormality. Through a comparative analysis, this paper explores how the structural features of these two traditions, such as embedded narration and narrative turning points, offer mutual insight. It further investigates how their respective narrative functions diverge: with Chinese chuanqi often reinforcing moral or religious frameworks, while the German Novelle tends to foreground psychological crisis and the individual's conflict with modern society.

Xin Wu, Göttingen University, Comparative Studies: From "Image" to "Conception": Revisiting Classical Chinese Poetry vis-à-vis Imagism

It seems to be a cliché to refer to Classical Chinese poetry vis-à-vis Imagism. The scholar Zhao Yiheng has also urged that the influence of Chinese poetry on modern British and American poetry should not be discussed only in relation to the imagist poetry. While noting these issues, the author attempts to initiate a new discussion using the "old topic", namely, to re-examine how imagist poets are inspired by classical Chinese poetry within the context of the Anglo-American New Poetry movement. On this basis, this article explores further the possible relation between "imagist poetics" and the "artistic conception" of Chinese poetry, providing a different perspective on the value of classical Chinese poetry.

David Herting, Göttingen University, Indology: Conceptions of truth and fiction in premodern literary short forms

Do stories have to tell the truth and what constitutes this narrative truth? In Europe, the opposition of historic truth and narrative fiction in literature has been discussed since the Middle Ages, during which this discussion was important for didactic, moralistic and religious narratives. The fictional status and truthfulness requirements of several short forms such as exempla, fables, and folktales was especially under discussion, with some arguing for an outright rejection of e.g. *exempla fabulosa*, while, on the other hand, clearly fictional tales are widely used in preaching narratives and historiography, even in literary cultures that seem to be understand themselves as particularly opposed to fiction and fairy tale. What legitimises fiction in this context? In a comparative approach, several examples of short tales coming from Medieval Latin (*exempla*) and Old Icelandic (*þættir* and *ævintýri*) literature will serve to illuminate the underlying conceptions of narrative truth in such texts from the High Middle Ages. Since the Old Indic narrative literature in the communities of Jainism and Buddhism operates under very similar circumstances as the European preaching exempla, i.e. stories as a means to a moral end and the direction of narration being generally from clergy to laity, a comparison of the two systems with respect to their approach to truth and fiction offers interesting perspectives, which are furthermore supported by the fact that these Indic and the European literatures often make recourse to the same tale types. Thus, we are able to compare the very same story in different environments.

Matthias Freise, Göttingen University, Slavic Department and World Literature: Theories of the poetical point from Italian, Spanish and Polish Baroque theory

I will compare the four most important baroque theoreticians on the *pointe*, the Spaniard Baltasar Gracián with his book *The Astuteness and Art of Ingenuity*, the Italian Matteo Peregrini with his essay *About Astuteness*, which is otherwise called *Wittiness*, *Liveliness*, or simply *the Concept*, Emanuele Tesauro with the essay *the Aristotelian telescope* and the Pole Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski with his essay *The One Book About Astuteness and Wit*. According to Gracián, a *conceptum* is an act of understanding that expresses the correspondence between objects. While Peregrini emphasizes the linguistic qualities of the *Pointe*, Tesauro is more concerned with its social function, and Gracián sees it as a play with words. The most sophisticated approach is, however, given by Sarbiewski, who describes the semantic shift it produces and the messages it can deliver.