Wixted, John Timothy, Review of Wai-lim Yip, *Diffusion of Distances: Dialogues between Chinese and Western Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), in *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 43 (1995), pp. 177-179. [Yip Wailim = 葉維廉 (Ye Weilian)]

Yip, Wai Lim. ***Diffusion of Distances: Dialogues between Chinese and Western Poetics.*** Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. xi + 246 pp.

From the book title, one expects great things here. What one gets, as one of the dust jacket reviewers (surely in irony) says, is "vintage Yip." But it is vintage Yip with a postmodern, "PC" twist. Notwithstanding its limited virtues, the book is so misleading, not to say wrong (and in certain key ways so dated), that I cannot possibly imagine recommending it to anyone.

The book is really a reprint of articles (and part of a book) that were published between 1968 and 1979. The author speaks of having revised and expanded the material. What is most noticeable, however, is the ignorance the volume reflects of major writings on Chinese literary theory and Chinese poetry of the past twenty-five years. The most obvious omission is the book by Pauline Yu (*The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition*, Princeton 1987). The truly major work by Stephen Owen (*Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, Harvard 1992) appeared too late to be incorporated and addressed. But such niceties as references to serious studies by virtually anyone in the past two decades are simply missing. These would belie Yip's assertion that "until quite recently, when a small number of scholars began to produce studies with concerns similar to mine, most articles and books on East-West literary relations have focused mainly on surface resemblances between two genetically unrelated works, the so-called parallel studies, without questioning the aesthetic grounding of each work separately, through comparison and contrast, so that the deeper, differing working dynamics of each system can be revealed" (3).

Yip sets up straw men and then heroically knocks them down. After his preliminary remarks on the Chinese language, he states, "Now. . . . we can be more adequately critical of most of the English translations of classical Chinese poetry, as the following examples will illustrate" (38); he then cites five translations of the same poem—the most recent of which dates from 1944!—with three from 1920 or earlier. That is centuries (if not light-years) ago in terms of Western sinology; nobody takes those translators seriously today in the terms that Yip does. (And it is ironic that most Chinese brought up in China who venture into rendering Chinese poetry into English follow precisely the Victorian style and habits of paraphrase, amplification, and over-specification that Yip here derides.) Yip also criticizes William Warburton, writing in 1788! (cited three times as "Warbuton," on 11 and 210 n. 2), and James Boswell, saying, "These writers do not ask *why* there are ideograms and what aesthetic horizon, what mechanics have conditioned such structural acts?" (10-11). Yet he himself buys into the nonsense that Chinese characters are "ideograms" (only a small percentage are), thereby perpetrating a worse misconception of his own—one central to his argument about the visual dimension of Chinese poems. (See the treatment of Chinese characters as "ideograms" in books on the Chinese language by Paul Kratochvil, John DeFrancis, Jerry Norman, and S. Robert Ramsey.)

Where one agrees with Yip, there is better treatment of the topic elsewhere, not referred to by him. I agree with him that "the Taoists suggest a decreative-creative dialectic to repossess the prepredicative concrete world . . . " (6) and that "there is an assumption in the Taoist decreative-creative dialectic that when we achieve our original condition and become one with Tao, everything else will follow its natural course" (77). Much of this is beautifully outlined in Kuang-ming Wu, *Chuang Tzu: World Philosopher at Play* (Crossroad & Scholars P, 1982). Yip's discussion of the Chinese influence on the Imagist movement, and uses of Western models in modern Chinese literature, is bettered by Achilles Fang's article, "From Imagism to Whitmanism in Recent Chinese Poetry: A Search for Poetics that Failed" (in Horst Frenz and G.L. Anderson, eds., *Indiana University Conference on Oriental-Western Literary Relations* [Chapel Hill 1955], 177-89). Yip speaks of the development of landscape poetry in China. But besides early treatments of the topic by J.D. Frodsham, there are important articles by Susan Bush ("Tsung Ping's Essay on Painting Landscape and the 'Landscape Buddhism' of Mount Lu," in Bush and Murck, eds., *Theories of the Arts in China* [Princeton 1983], 132-64) and Raoul Birnbaum ("Buddhist Meditation Teachings and the Birth of 'Pure' Landscape Painting in China," *Society of the Study of Chinese Religions Bulletin* 9 [Fall 1981], 42-58) that are in no way drawn upon. None of these is noted by Yip. He keeps reinventing the wheel—and not doing it as well as others.

This is nowhere more true than in Yip's argument that many Chinese "poems are, in essence, nonmetaphoric and nonsymbolic, poems in which the vehicle contains the tenor" (18; also 93 and 108). There is a very nuanced treatment of this in the Pauline Yu book referred to above; she also, unlike Yip, brings in the dimensions of *different authors* and *different time-periods*. He tends to treat classical Chinese poetry as one undifferentiated whole, subject to his limiting approach. Also, the traditional critics, Lu Chi, Liu Hsieh, and especially Ssu-k'ung T'u, are treated by Yip, but get far better treatment by Stephen Owen in the book already cited. Even though the Owen work appeared too late for inclusion, much scholarship on the first two critics noted, and a wealth of good work on Ssu-k'ung T'u, including articles by Maureen Robertson and Pauline Yu (see the Owen book for citations), is passed blithely by.

Yip has not modified his view that the experience of Chinese poetry is largely like that of a movie camera: "our perceptual activity [when reading a line by Meng Hao-jan] almost mimics that of the movie camera, starting with a pan of the vast wilderness, followed by a tilting shot of the wide sky, then lowering and zooming closer to a stretch of low trees" (38). This was outlined in his 1976 volume of Chinese poem translations and in his 1972 volume on Wang Wei. Unfortunately, the author seems to have learned nothing from the reviews of those works that appeared at the time (*inter alia*, that by Stephen Owen in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 37.1 [November 1977], 100-02). Indeed, in the volume under consideration he liberally cites his own work as authoritative (e.g., 11-12, 53, 72), and draws on his earlier Wang Wei volume for poem illustrations.

Central to Yip's argument is his view that "the classical Chinese language, as it is used in poetry, is free from syntactical rigidities" (29). Although elsewhere this is qualified (42 and 79), the point is maintained: "This syntactic freedom promotes a kind of prepredicative condition wherein words, like objects in the real-life world, are free from predetermined closures of relationship and meaning and offer themselves to us in an open space" (30). In contrast with this is big, bad English: "In English, as in all Indo-European languages, a sentence is almost always structured in a stipulated direction according to rigid syntactical rules" (29); "How, then, can a language of rigid syntactical rules such as English successfully approximate a mode of presentation whose success depends on freedom from syntax?. . . . The answer is that it cannot . . . " (48); "I need not recount the specific aesthetic perception the tenseless Chinese has helped promote, a fact I have written about on several occasions" (16). The fact of the matter is that, syntactically speaking, Chinese and English are very similar. It is true that there is more specificity of person and number in English, with attendant "advantages and disadvantages," and greater precision through the use of prepositions than in most Chinese poetry; but the aspectual nature of Chinese verbs, as opposed to tenses in English, hardly distinguishes Chinese from Indo-European languages. Yip seems unaware that there are Indo-European languages, like Russian, that are also aspectual.

Just as Yip tends to treat all classical Chinese poetry as the same, he hypostasizes things Chinese. He speaks of "the Chinese mode of perception" (48) "the Chinese treatment [of a moment in nature]" (65), "The Chinese poet (78), and "the Chinese artistic temperament" (98). Not surprisingly, he portrays these in rosy terms (that reveal more of the author's idealized fantasy-image of Chinese culture than of the putative subject). He speaks of the "Chinese emphasis upon the Taoist 'equality of things' and upon the Confucian 'Great Unity'" (177); "the much-cherished Chinese position that sees human beings as cooperative partners of nature, not exploiters" (182); and "a cooperative framework, to which most traditional Chinese intellectuals commit themselves, [where] the principle of domination and manipulation is out of place" (183). The West, by contrast, is the "hegemonic center" (4). "The Western ways of territorializing being conceal being rather than exposing it" (37). Reference is made to the "racist and selfish attitude" implied in Darwin and Spencer (177). And we are reminded of the "consumer-oriented, goal-directed, instrumental reason of the post-Enlightenment West" (5). Yip is also very critical of Plato and Aristotle, while quoting approvingly (74) two arch-neoplatonists, Plotinus and St. Teresa.

Worse yet, Yip lumps Chinese together with other Asian or non-Western languages, ways of thought, and cultures, creating one undifferentiated mass. He speaks of "the East and the West" (1), "both Eastern and Western cultures" (80), "two genetically unrelated cultures, the Oriental and the Occidental" (19), and "the Oriental mind" (122). Only someone woefully ignorant of the vast differences *between* East Asian cultures and languages—to say nothing of between the constituents of whatever he might take the "East" to be—would make such formulations. (Cf. my article, "Reverse Orientalism," *Sino-Japanese Studies* 2.1 [1989], 17-27.)

Sinologists cite classical Chinese works, like the *Chuang Tzu*, by *chüan* (chapter) title and/or number, as well as page number, because these works appear in a plethora of editions; that way, everyone can at least find the right chapter of cited material. Yip cites classical Chinese works by page number *only*. This is like someone's citing "p. 375" of the Bible, without indicating the book or chapter it is from. Also, not only does the author cite (209 n. 3) an article written in Chinese (another self-reference) *only* by a translated English title (without even the romanized Chinese one), he also cites the Chinese-language journal it is from *only* by a translated English title. Such a reference is extremely hard, even for those well acquainted with both languages, to check. (Such citations by certain writers seem to reflect both ignorance of scholarly convention and implicit arrogance in the assumption that others cannot read Chinese anyway.) Additionally, there is the citation of a book in Chinese (an authorial self-reference) that is given an initial "full" citation (one less than ideal, but adequate, on 211 n. 24), even though it had already been introduced with quite a different style of initial citation (209-10 n. 6). And French gets miscited ("Sur un [sic] philosophie . . . " (83]), as does German ("*Barock und Kunst de [sic] Gegenreformation*" [211 n. 28]).

The part of the book I was least uncomfortable with was that dealing with Anglo-American poetry—precisely the area I know least about. Knowing what I do of the rest of the book, it hardly inspires confidence. What I fear is that readers without a background in Chinese poetry, poetics, and literary thought will think the book's treatment of them is reliable. What they are in fact getting is a kind of postmodern version of Fenellosa's "classic" treatment of the Chinese written character, one that similarly tells us more about current Western interests than it does of anything Chinese. Here, the idealization of another culture is being peddled to current Western academic fashion in its jargon by one claiming expertise in, if not also identity with, that culture.

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