

# review article on literary archeology

Jiexin Yi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Affiliation not available

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## Abstract

In this review article, I have located the trajectory of development of the notion of literary archeology and the third relation of comparative literature, compared to influence and parallel ones, expounded by him in his newly published book in 2016, *The Third Notion of Comparative Literature: the Possibility of Literary Archeology*. My research shows that he has conceived this notion more than a decade ago and it's the result of his lifetime endeavor on comparative literature in East Asia. I have employed almost all his monographs to trace the gradual formation of his ideas with two books as the focus, *The Third Notion of Comparative Literature: the Possibility of Literary Archeology* and *The Image of Willow: The Material Exchange and the Ancient Chinese and Japanese Literature*. The former aims to construct the theory of literary archeology as a renovated subject matter and the latter is composed of the case studies on willow which provide abundant evidence to illustrate his point.

## The Birth of the Notion of Literary Archeology

*A Review of Zhejun Zhang's Work*

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In this review article, I have located the trajectory of development of the notion of literary archeology and the third relation of comparative literature, compared to influence and parallel ones, expounded by him in his newly published book in 2016, *The Third Notion of Comparative Literature: the Possibility of Literary Archeology*. My research shows that he has conceived this notion more than a decade ago and it's the result of his lifetime endeavor on comparative literature in East Asia. I have employed almost all his monographs to trace the gradual formation of his ideas with two books as the focus, *The Third Notion of Comparative Literature: the Possibility of Literary Archeology* and *The Image of Willow: The Material Exchange and the Ancient Chinese and Japanese Literature*. The former aims to construct the theory of literary archeology as a renovated subject matter and the latter is composed of the case studies on willow which provide abundant evidence to illustrate his point.

## Key Words

literary archeology, the third relation, material exchange, “the Six Confucian Classics are all histories”, recovery of material objects

Zhejun Zhang is a professor in the School of Chinese Language and Literature in Beijing Normal University and his research focus is the comparative literature studies in East Asia. Majoring in literature and cultural exchanges in East Asia, Zhang is the first Ph.D. graduated from the Institute for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies in Beijing University, the first institute for academic studies on comparative literature in China founded in 1985. In this review article, I will locate the trajectory of development of the notion of literary archeology and the third relation of comparative literature, compared to influence and parallel ones, expounded by him in his newly published book *The Third Notion of Comparative Literature: the Possibility of Literary Archeology*(2016). Though the concept is groundbreaking and innovative, it has already been conceived by him more than a decade ago. In “Chinese School and Comparative Literature of the New

Century”, Zhang (2000) has pointed out the importance of the objectiveness of research of comparative literature as a key criterion for establishing the Chinese school of comparative literature, a prospect envisaged by his mentor, Shaodang Yan, director of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies in Beijing University. He also stressed that empirical studies in traditional Chinese literature should be added a theoretical dimension. The same year also witnessed the publication of another paper of his, “Is the Age of Empirical Studies of Comparative Literature Gone”. In this paper, he rectified the false charge that the studies of the rapport de faits, the “foreign trade” labelled sarcastically by Rene Wellek, are mere recording of the receptions and impacts of authors and thus boast of little academic value, claiming that empirical studies concerning the bilateral relations of the literary works between two countries involve the studies of impact as well as the studies of the transfiguration and transformation of the elements from the original literary works in the new ones. Such studies, therefore, are not totally empirical but also contain subjects who conduct the changes, i.e., the authors. The impact factors should not be separated from the creation factors by them. This is very similar to the combination of argumentation and textual criticism in traditional Chinese literary studies.

All these stances can be reflected in this tour de force of his. It can be regarded as the quintessence of the ideas of Zhang on the Chinese style of comparative literature for many years. He unequivocally indicated the interrelationships among his major works. In *Introduction to the Comparative Literature in East Asia* (2004), there is a chapter on the image of Japan and South Korea in Chinese literature. In the same year, he developed this chapter into another book, *Studies on the Image of Japan in Ancient Chinese Literature* (2004). While writing this book, he found Japanese material objects a major concern for most of the ancient Chinese scholars, so he mentioned these objects in each chapter of the book as an important media for the ancient Chinese to get to know Japan. From that time on, he showed his interest to the studies of matters in Chinese and Japanese literature and thus he published one of his most significant books, *The Image of Willow: The Material Exchange and the Ancient Chinese and Japanese Literature* (2011), a lengthy elaboration on the image of poplar and willow in more than five hundred of ancient Chinese and Japanese poems. He recalled his original plan of writing matters exported from Japan to China and China to Japan and the matters to be covered consist of four different types, poplar and willow, tiger, elephant and backgammon. Due to limited time and enormous labor required for searching the materials, he had to choose just one of them and left the rest of the three for his latest book, *The Third Notion of Comparative Literature*. By the time he tried to construct his own theory, therefore, he has already accumulated countless substantial evidence to support his argument after dealing with enough case studies. A hindsight of the emergence of the concept of literary archeology which spans almost his entire academic career by far manifests professor Zhang’s ambition to renovate Chinese comparative literature studies, for which he was nominated as the “Yangtse Scholar” in 2016, a highest honorary title for a researcher in China at present.

I would like to further trace the gradual formation of his ideas in the above-mentioned books. In *Introduction to the Comparative Literature in East Asia*, he summarizes the merits of interpretation of Japanese culture by Zunxian Huang, a famous scholar in Qing dynasty, which lie in three aspects: objective, historical, free from the idea of Chinese cultural superiority over Japan. By historical he means that cultural phenomenon can only be understood within a certain historical background and their developmental process in history should also be considered. These principles became his own guidelines for research in the future. Meanwhile, this book established a framework for his later research by acknowledging the multiplicity and homogeneity of the literature in East Asia. Countries like China and Japan share much in common in their culture and literature but they also differ in some ways. And most importantly, Chinese culture has a huge impact on Japan and South Korea with a lot of cultural exchanges in history. The book *Studies on the Image of Japan in Ancient Chinese Literature* highlighted these cultural exchanges by examining the Sino-Japanese relationships in different historical periods, before Tang dynasty, Tang dynasty, Song dynasty, Yuan dynasty, Ming dynasty, Qing dynasty, etc., among which Tang dynasty is the most important period because of the constant cultural exchanges led by Kentoshi, a possible media through which poplar and willow were brought to Japan.

It’s just these cultural exchanges mostly through material objects that aroused his attention when he engaged

in the research on the relationships between ancient Chinese and Japanese literature and found that this kind of material exchange constitutes the third relation that underlies the poems of both China and Japan which makes them so similar. This similarity may be wrongly confirmed as caused by the relation of influence but actually it's not because no evidence can be gathered to consolidate the direct influence of one poem on another and it should be attributed to the matters described in the two poems which connect the two countries as a natural outcome of cultural exchanges in history. This is not the parallel relation, either. Zhang's discovery of the third relation gave birth to *The Image of Willow* in which various types of the third relations are discussed.

Zhang's exposition of these different manifestations of the third relations constitutes a panorama of the history of the vicissitudes of the cultural implications of willow ever since its introduction in Japan from China. It became widely accepted and planted all over the island. Concomitantly, the perceptions of it was also imported in the process, for example, fetishism of it as a symbol of life and vitality or personal freedom and obligation, aesthetic appreciation of it as the paradigm of feminine beauty, and its religious function of exorcism, etc. Zhang recorded all these variations in *The Image of Willow*, which makes the whole book appear as a historiography of ideas comparable to Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*. Zhang's representation of the history of the cultural exchange of willow between the two countries does share much in common with Lovejoy's description of the history of ideas. It's both synchronic and diachronic. It's a "historical synthesis" or "conglomerate" (Lovejoy 16) in the sense that it's composed of a variety of "the manifestations of specific unit-ideas in the collective thought of large groups of persons" (19). For examples, judging from the location of the plantation of willow, it can be classified as cemetery willow, courtyard willow, gate willow, brothel exit willow, etc. Each of them bears a certain kind of cultural implication which acts as a unit-idea in the whole system of the conception of willow. Within a certain historical period, each unit-idea prevailed in people's everyday life. Yet the differences between the two approach are also apparent. Zhang's study on people's perception of willow is determined by the physical properties of willow and thus is unlikely to "degenerate into a species of merely imaginative historical generalization" (21). The peculiarity of willow as a tree species constitutes the condition of people's imagination of it. For example, its vitality generated the life worship of it. Its gracefulness and limpness naturally aroused the association of women.

Thanks to Zhang's investigation on the introduction and dissemination of the Chinese cultural implications of willow in Japan, the third relation, which laid hidden behind the comparable literary works of the two countries, can be distinguished from the impact factor. In a sense, the third relation is caused by the influence of one poet upon another. But this influence is not achieved through the medium of literary works but rather the cultural implications of the matter described in the poems. In *The Image of Willow*, it's always the Japanese poets who were influenced by Chinese ones in regard to the aesthetic or religious perceptions of willow. There are also some particular cases in which the third relation is entangled with the relation of influence.

It's noteworthy that Zhang has discovered that these implications would not remain unchanged in Japan as the recipient. They would undergo a lot of variations and transformations especially when they interplayed with the local cultural notions. Zhang has gone to great length to trace these evolutions of the notions concerning willow which literally became a major focus of literary archeology. They also serve to enrich the definition of the third relation in that the relationship was not a simple learning, reception, and emulation formula yet it involved many subversions and transfigurations. For example, willow was transformed from a sacred tree expelling evil spirits in China into a demonizing symbol, either a hiding place for ghosts or becoming ghosts itself in Japan. And in China, it was a symbol of authority and social status but later in Japan its implication incorporated the personality of Yuanming Tao, the famous Chinese poet and hermit in Eastern Jin Dynasty and thus generated a Taoist ideal political aspiration which both emphasizes personal freedom and obligation. The association of willow with gender also experienced a change from the powerful masculine symbol to the impotent and fragile feminine one across the two countries. All these complicated variations make the confirmation of the third relation very difficult because it takes large amount of historical materials and poems to certify the original implication of willow reflected in Chinese poems as the sender and the changed one in Japanese poems as the receiver. Zhang's unravelling of these entanglements which

has almost been forgotten and not recorded in standard historiography is the major part of his argument. It's just this certification which can be traced to the tradition of textual research in China that makes the approach of literary archeology boast of considerable academic significance since it serves to retrieve the lost historical truth concerning the cultural exchanges between the two countries.

The discovery and classification of the various types of third relations are of vital importance to the proposal of literary archeology. The methodology and core idea of this newly established discipline are both contained in them. Zhang's investigation of the time and space of the matter appeared in the poems is a crucial strategy in the certification of the third relation. Moreover, literary works, poems in particular, are the carrier of the cultural exchanges. Specifically, the exchange of matter would bring about the exchange of ideas concerning it, and these ideas would be accepted and emulated by the poets of the recipient country. Then the ideas would be embodied in their poems, which formed an interesting and detectable connection with the poems of sender country.

*The Image of Willow*, a project with immensely ample evidence, laid a solid foundation for the theoretical construction of *The Third Notion of Comparative Literature* by Zhang. Literary archeology, as suggested metaphorically in the book, is just the excavation of the layers of archeological sites through the recovery of the matters and ideas among the countless poems and other literary works in ancient times in the related countries where cultural exchanges used to be frequently occurring. What distinguishes it from archeology is that these layers of archeological sites are the world in which people dwelt. The literary works recorded the exchanges of matters and ideas in the different living worlds constituted by the two countries. Therefore, the authentication of the messages in these literary works conveying signs of exchanges is crucial to the effectiveness of literary archeology. Zhejun Zhang employed the slogan of Xuecheng Zhang, an outstanding historian in Qing dynasty, "the Six Confucian Classics (not written by Confucius but sorted out by him) are all histories", to validate the material descriptions of the ancient Chinese and Japanese literary works, especially poems. This claim is sufficiently grounded in the tradition of ancient Chinese literature, history, and philosophy, which is characterized by a hazy boundary among them. Literature is viewed as history, so *Book of Songs* is also history. Many great scholars in ancient China held similar viewpoint as Xuecheng Zhang before him. The history recorded in literary works, however, is different from the one in official history compilations. It's mainly composed of histories of people's everyday life which boast of unique academic value with abundant details. These detailed recordings of the daily life of the common mass can't be found in standard history books and chronicles which usually aim to narrate the vicissitudes of the politics. That's why Xuecheng Zhang thought that *Book of Songs* is a useful complement to the official history books. He also proposed that the literary and historical works can be mutually corroborated. This important idea has been borrowed by Zhejun Zhang and employed in the analysis of literary archeology. He adds that literary archeology is not just a study on the history of people's life but also on the history of matters as well as landscapes. This means that through the analysis of the poems with the aid of history works lost matters and disappeared landscapes can be recovered and moreover, existing matters and landscape paintings can be used in this recovering endeavor too. In *The Image of Willow*, he has collected numerous paintings from China and Japan as illustrations to strengthen his argument. This approach has naturally lead to a conclusion that runs contrary to common sense that historical background is just a footnote to literary studies. Instead, it now becomes the subject of research with the history of the landscapes consisted of material facts foregrounded in the poetic text. In Zhang's words, footnote containing the information of matters or places can become an article or even a book (Zhang, *The Third Notion* 284). This kind of study in the form of footnote also derived from the literary tradition in ancient China.

Obviously, Zhejun Zhang has employed Xuecheng Zhang's point that "the Six Confucian Classics are all histories" as the theoretical foundation of literary archeology. In fact, there are many different interpretations of this doctrine, the generally acknowledged of which is that Xuecheng Zhang proposed this idea in order to challenge Zhen Dai, another influential Confucian scholar in Qing Dynasty, who upheld that the Six Confucian Classics are the carrier of Tao. Although Zhejun Zhang's explanation of this slogan which mainly aims at elucidating the relationship of history and literature in ancient China is somewhat superficial compared to Xuecheng Zhang's original intention, it's quite useful to verify the effectiveness of the literary works in

ancient China as the recorder of history.

To further emphasize that the goal of poetry is to record historical events and material facts, Zhejun Zhang reinterprets the concept in the famous slogan concerning ancient Chinese poetry, “Poetry is to express one’s aspirations”. Rather, he proposes that poetry is to record things. In this sense, poetry assumes the same function as diary. He then deals with this journalizing feature of Chinese poetry in three aspects: title; line; preface, postscript or footnote. He argues that these three parts of a poem can all fulfill the function of a diary, that is, to record things. And the reason why poem has to be diary-like in ancient China is not only due to its primary concern mentioned above but also because of the belated and immature development of the genre of diary. Diary originated in the Tang dynasty and flourished in the Ming and Qing dynasty while poetry, as the most significant literary genre in ancient China, boasts of a much longer history. Moreover, diary is written daily but poem is improvised and real time. Therefore, when writing a diary one has to recall what has happened for the day yet poets are able to record everything they are witnessing immediately on the spot. Juyi Bai is the representative figure of such kind of poet. Japanese poetry, influenced by the Chinese one and especially Juyi Bai, is also like diary. It should be noted that both Chinese and Japanese poetry are not monolithic in regard to their contents. There are realistic parts as well as symbolized, fabricated, and exaggerated parts. Zhejun Zhang points out that to distinguish these two different kinds of contents in poetry is crucial to the effectiveness of literary archeology because they are often mixed together. He cited Xuecheng Zhang’s differentiation of literature and history that the former can only be used as historical materials after the fabricated contents are eliminated and the realistic ones are retained. And his own research experiences show that he can make full use of these two parts in poetry which are considered the primary source of historical materials by him (Zhang, *The Third Notion* 116). This point can be further evidenced by two other interesting examples. First is the saying of “there’s a poem to prove this” in novels and dramas. Zhejun Zhang attributes this to the foremost proving power of poetry (Zhang, *The Third Notion* 141). Second is the practice of the imperial exams in ancient China in which the attendees’ knowledge of poem and prose were mandatorily tested despite the fact that they were supposed to be officials after passing the exam. The reason for this practice is that poem and prose would provide them with multiple precedents of history and politics in society which will enhance their governing capabilities.

Zhang devotes a whole chapter to summarize the fundamentals of the third relation by the theorization of the concrete expositions in *The Image of Willow*. The basic objective of literary archeology is to restore the living world through the discovery of the fragments of material history in a multitude of literary works in the two countries with a lot of cultural exchanges. As the research goes on, these fragments will form a complete picture of the original condition of the matter in history. The difference between the third relation and the relation of influence lies in that the sender and receiver of the former is the living world and it’s a kind of a diachronic exchange. It’s also different from the parallel relation since the latter is based on similarities of the living worlds in which there are no exchanges of matters and ideas. These exchanges of matters and ideas are the media of the third relation. Literary works are the vehicle that recorded these exchanges. Once the matters and ideas become a universal subject matter in many literary works in the two countries, the exchanges of them and the third relation can be confirmed.

The research of literary archeology on the third relation, Zhang argues, is a process starting from the individual cases to the universal ones. When a certain material object appears frequently at the same time and place mentioned in several poems, it deserves critical attention. First, one has to confirm whether the material object is factual or not. Then it has to be frequently occurring at the same or approximate time and place depicted in other poems by the same poet or other ones. For example, Lin Yang, Yuxi Liu and another anonymous poet, all wrote about the willow in Hua E Pavilion, a building in Xingqing Palace in Tang dynasty. To take a step further, when the material object repeatedly occurs in different time and place and especially across different countries, it will probably become a subject of study for the third relation and literary archeology. Zhang also stresses the importance of systematic and taxonomic recovery of the material objects. For instance, gate willow and courtyard willow should fall into different categories; willow in China is a subsystem and in Japan another one, the two forming a whole system. All in all, Such an approach to literature, as Zhang’s case studies have demonstrated, is thoroughly empirical as the researcher needs to find

as much as possible relevant literary works and other materials to support his thesis.

*The Image of Willow* and *The Third Notion of Comparative Literature* are the two most important books for the proposal of the notion of literary archeology. Besides, Zhang's other works also provided many useful materials and examples for his argument in *The Third Notion of Comparative Literature*. For example, Kōjirō Yoshikawa's comments on Yaochen Mei's poem, which comes from the book, *Studies on Kōjirō Yoshikawa* is mentioned to explain the issue of the recovery of history and the image of Japan in Chinese literature; "Juyi Bai", a Noh or Nogaku, which is from the book, *Japanese Noh with Chinese Themes* (2005), is used to illustrate the realistic feature of poetry. It's not an exaggerated claim, therefore, as Zhang admits that literary archeology is the result yielded by the research on material facts in literature for almost his entire career (Zhang, *The Third Notion* 402).

In the present era in China when the subjectivity studies of literature remain the mainstream, Zhang's proposal of the study of material objects seems to be outmoded. He has been advocating the scientific approach to literature all his life and his relentless efforts finally aroused the attention of his peers and got its due rewards. He also believes that the tradition of the ancient Chinese literature should be revived and revitalized. The significance of literary archeology or the third relation to comparative literature, according to him, lies in its solution of the puzzling problems and correction of the mistake of oversimplification in the literary relationships between two countries, i.e., regarding all kinds of literary exchanges as the relations of influence. What's more, the scope of study of comparative literature is expanded as the living world is included in the study of literary archeology which may not be just limited to ancient literature but could be applied to modern literature, too. In a word, Zhang's approach to establishing a literary theory which is based on the attempt to returning to the literary tradition of China may not be the same as Ning Wang expected, that is, to mix Western theory with local elements and to reform and reconstruct it while engaging in a dialogue with it, but he did achieve the heterogeneity and unique value (Wang, *Internationalization* 115) and the "modernization of ancient Chinese literary theory" (Wang, *Validity* 67) that Wang has envisioned for the Chinese literary theorist.

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