

A Review of Chinese Comparative Literature Scholar Professor Jing-Yao Sun's Research on "Paraliterature"

Qi Li*

School of Liberal Arts, Daqing Normal University, Daqing 163712, China

*Corresponding author: Qi Li, littleangelpeter@163.com

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Abstract: Professor Jing-Yao Sun, a prominent figure in Chinese comparative literature and a renowned scholar in the field, has made significant contributions to the study of "paraliterature," an area often overlooked by Chinese scholars. Since the early 1980s, he has been at the forefront of exploring Suzhou Pingtan through a literary perspective. In the 21st century, he emerged as a leading authority in the comparative analysis of "paraliterature," particularly through his examination of storytelling between China and America. Furthermore, his insightful exploration of the essence of Ion's oral literary performance and Plato's misconceptions has paved the way for a deeper understanding of "paraliterature." Professor Sun's methodologies have profoundly inspired subsequent generations of comparative literature students in China, motivating them to contribute more to the study of international comparative literature.

Keywords: Literature; Paraliterature; Comparative literature; Suzhou Pingtan; Storytelling

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1. Introduction

While some scholars in the Chinese academic circle have conducted in-depth research on the loanword "paraliterature" ^[1], and some works have systematically studied the paratexts of modern Chinese literature ^[2], the majority of Chinese scholars still find the term "paraliterature," a literary criticism term, somewhat unfamiliar. Paraliterature has been a subject of enduring discussion in French and American academia. For instance, Alain-Michel Boyer, a professor of comparative literature at the University of Nantes in France, is an active paraliterature theorist. In his recent work, the title has shifted from *la paralittérature* in singular form to *les paralittératures* in plural form ^[3].

As the French scholar Daniel Couégnas puts it: "*La paralittérature* is a word that one cannot use with confidence, that one cannot easily understand or read. The word itself carries methodological, cultural, and even ideological conflicts. ... Behind the word is a much older issue than the one being debated, that of literary standards and the hierarchy of genres" ^[4]. Yves Chevrel, a prominent comparative scholar, defines "paraliterature"

as “any text that is not classified or accepted by formal institutions”^[5] and suggests that a shift in textual status is possible. It is not difficult to understand this: in fact, there is no clear and constant division between literary classics and non-literary classics, between literature and paraliterature. Therefore, paraliterature should not be excluded but should have a place in the study of literature and comparative literature. In the field of comparative literature, paraliterature is generally called “category literature,” and further categorized into second-rated paraliterature (*sous-littérature*), infra-literary (*infralittérature*), marginalized literature (*littérature marginale*), and even inferior literature (*mauvaise littérature*) which is often perceived as challenging to gain entry into the esteemed realm of literary studies.

It is noteworthy that Professor Jing-Yao Sun (1943–2012), an important founder of China’s comparative literature and a renowned comparative literature scholar, displayed visionary academic foresight, solid academic achievements, and made significant contributions to the research field of “paraliterature,” which has not yet received sufficient attention in China. Born in 1943 in Jiading, Shanghai, Professor Sun graduated from the Chinese Department of Fudan University in 1966. He served as a professor at the School of Humanities and Communication of Shanghai Normal University, a doctoral supervisor, and the discipline leader of Comparative Literature and World Literature, as well as the Vice President and Director of the Academic Committee of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association^[6]. Professor Sun has achieved remarkable academic accomplishments and authored numerous books. However, most research on Professor Sun’s academic achievements has focused on his comparative literature history, research methods, and the theoretical construction of Chinese comparative literature or the “Chinese School.” To date, few scholars have recognized that Professor Sun was the first scholar in China to pay attention to the related theories of “paraliterature” and its vast potential for academic interpretation. He not only embraced the widely accepted term “paraliterature” but also positioned the study of “paraliterature” within the perspective of comparative literature as a significant research field or theoretical paradigm, making substantial contributions to this end: as early as the early 1980s, Professor Sun became a trailblazer in the study of Suzhou Pingtan from a literary perspective; in the 21st century, he emerged as a leader in the comparative study of storytelling between China and the United States and also became a pivotal figure in advancing the study of “paraliterature” due to his elucidation of the essence of Ion’s oral literary performance and Plato’s misjudgment.

2. The pioneer of comparative study in “paraliterature”

In the eyes of ordinary people, Suzhou Pingtan is merely a form of *quyi* art that utilizes the Suzhou dialect for speech, acting, and singing as its primary artistic mediums. However, from the perspective of “paraliterature” studies, Suzhou Pingtan undoubtedly emerges as a distinct form of “paraliterature” imbued with the rich colors of oral literature in China. There is evidence to suggest that as early as the early 1980s, Professor Jing-Yao Sun and his disciple, Shi Ma, directed their attention to Suzhou Pingtan, a form of “paraliterature” distinguished by its Chinese oral literary characteristics, and examined it through the perspective of literature and art. Their conclusion states: “The alternating use of dialogue and singing imbues Suzhou Pingtan with a comprehensive character akin to drama. ... The artistry and communicative power of language are maximally utilized in Suzhou Pingtan, particularly in breaking the ‘fourth wall’ and eliciting audience participation for maximum re-creation, which constitutes the secret of Suzhou Pingtan’s profound artistic allure”^[7].

From the perspective of “language art,” Professor Sun sought to unveil the underlying factors contributing to the artistic charm of Suzhou Pingtan. This establishes Professor Sun as a pivotal pioneer in the literature of Suzhou Pingtan. Moreover, Professor Sun assumed a significant leadership role in paraliterature research

from the standpoint of comparative literature. In his comparative analysis of storytelling between China and the United States, he strategically noted, as a comparative literature scholar, that texts such as oral literature, popular literature, folk literature, and children's literature – often marginalized by literary research, educational institutions, and pedagogy as non-“canonical” literature – have been prolifically produced and widely disseminated through mass channels. Since the 6th Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) in 1970 (whose principal theme included several discussions on “paraliterature”), the study of paraliterature has burgeoned as a vibrant new domain within the international academic arena. “The exploration of paraliterature, encompassing the comparative examination of Chinese and American storytelling, constitutes a novel research avenue aligning with global academic trends. It also represents a fresh frontier in comparative literature research, offering practical insights for the revitalization and enrichment of China's exceptional oral performance literature. Moreover, the study of oral performance literature underscores profound cognitive cultural traditions of far-reaching significance. This living cultural tradition is inherently embedded within these vibrant oral literary performances, providing an avenue for inheritance, preservation, application, and innovation by all stakeholders. Consequently, it serves as an effective and engaging platform for comprehending and embracing one's cultural heritage, thereby rendering the comparative study of Chinese and foreign oral performance literature an essential scholarly pursuit for recognizing and appreciating both self and others' cultural traditions” [8].

In light of this, the paper not only possesses significant theoretical value but also holds practical implications of paramount importance. The article was extensively reprinted in the authoritative Chinese academic journal – Renmin University Photocopying Newspaper Materials (Literature Theory), No. 11, 2004 [9]. With this contribution, Professor Sun indisputably emerges as a preeminent figure in the comparative study of “paraliterature.”

3. An important pathfinder for advancing the study of “paraliterature”

Professor Jing-Yao Sun has not only made pioneering contributions to the study of Chinese “paraliterature” but has also been deeply immersed in this field, emerging as a crucial pathfinder for its advancement.

Professor Sun asserted that amidst the burgeoning research on “paraliterature” in contemporary academic circles, particularly in the context of present-day oral literary performances, it is imperative not only to delve into debates surrounding figures like the “chanting poet” Ion but also to reflect upon their modern-day significance. He initially conducted a literary analysis, noting that Homer's epic poems were recited in poetry competitions during the Panathenaean Festival, undergoing extensive oral transmission and adaptation by ancient Greeks. Referencing Ion, he observed the portrayal of participation in the “Homer” poetry recitation competition at the Panathenaean Festival, which distinctly differs from the dramatic impersonation characteristic of conventional theatrical performances. The recitation contest represents a narrative oral literary activity with the performer assuming responsibilities such as compilation and linkage, thus integrating the roles of director and performer. Professor Sun then elucidated the essence of Ion's poetry recitation technique, emphasizing Ion's role as an oral literary performer adept at “explaining Homer's poems.” Ion's interpretation of Homer's epic poems involves elucidating the poet's words through his own interpretative lens, rather than simply embodying characters. This interpretive approach is a hallmark of oral literary performance, characterized by narrative or recitative techniques. Additionally, Professor Sun demonstrated Plato's deliberate rejection of Ion's reciting technique, attributing it to Plato's rationalistic dismissal rooted in the hierarchical concept of “justice” in the “Republic.” Plato categorized all oral literary narrative performances, including those centered on epic

storytelling, as dramatic imitations, thus excluding them from the category of simple storytelling oral literary performances and relegating them to the realm of “imitation” performance, as per his overarching poetics. Professor Sun exposed Plato’s misjudgment of Ion’s oral literary performance based on his theory of dramatic imitation ^[10].

Undoubtedly, this article embodies the profound academic insight of Professor Sun, echoing significantly within academic circles and solidifying his status as a crucial pathfinder for advancing the study of “paraliterature.”

4. Conclusion: the enlightenment of Professor Jing-Yao Sun’s research on “paraliterature”

It is worth noting that as one of the important founders of Chinese comparative literature and a renowned scholar in the field, Professor Jing-Yao Sun’s approach to “paraliterature” offers profound enlightenment for the future study of Chinese comparative literature. Firstly, it emphasizes the necessity of a comprehensive academic vision rooted in both Chinese and Western studies, while also encompassing a global perspective. As Zhong-Shu Qian, a prominent Chinese scholar, aptly stated: “But in poetry, notes, novels, operas, and even folk proverbs and interpretations ... contain very fresh artistic theories, which deserve our attention and commendation” ^[11]. Secondly, it underscores the importance of keeping abreast with international academic frontiers and attending to the “interpretation of various arts” ^[12], as demonstrated by Ulrich Weisstein, a distinguished scholar of comparative literature. Thirdly, it advocates for ambition and assertiveness, as evidenced by Professor Sun’s prompting of Weisstein to reconsider his “Eurocentric position” ^[13]. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of embracing “*die gesunde Vernunft*” (common sense) ^[14] in the vein of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, transcending the preconceived notion that “within the literary hierarchy, the noble, official, courtly genre completely ignores the existence of rural oral literature” ^[4]. Lastly, it underscores the significance of adhering to the principle of “two actions,” pursuing the policy of “double hundred,” and embracing the principle of “three approaches” ^[15]. By innovating traditional approaches and making substantial contributions to the study of international comparative literature, scholars can advance the field and enrich its discourse.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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