A Study of Heterogeneous Similarities in Poetics between Pre-Qin China and Ancient Greece from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract: Chinese poetics originated in the pre-Qin period, while Western poetics emerged during the Hellenistic period. Despite the lack of direct communication and influence between the two traditions due to geographical distance and chronological separation, there are notable commonalities between Sino-Western thinkers. These commonalities are particularly evident in the ethical instruction, ethical harmony, moral passion and inspiration and ethics of rhetoric that are pursued and advocated by the scholars of different cultures. Guided by Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism, this paper compares the poetics of Confucius philosophy and Mingjia School with those of Plato, Aristotle, and the Sophists. It reveals the shared ethical concerns of Chinese and Western poetics within the context of their distinct cultural backgrounds and respective historical periods.

Keywords: Pre-Qin; Ancient Greek; poetics; heterogeneous similarity; ethical literary criticism

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标题： 文学伦理学批评视域下的先秦和古希腊诗学比较研究

内容摘要： 中国诗学起源于先秦时期，而西方诗学则出现在希腊化时期。尽管由于地理距离和时间上的分隔，两个传统之间缺乏直接的交流和影响，但是中西思想家之间仍存在显著的共性。这些共性尤其体现在伦理教化、伦理和谐、道德激情与灵感以及修辞伦理上，这些都是不同文化的学者所追求和倡导的。在聂珍钊的文学伦理学批评指导下，本文比较了儒家哲学和名家学派的诗学与柏拉图、亚里士多德及诡辩学派的诗学。本文认为在各自独特的文化背景和历史时期中，中西诗学具有共同的伦理关切。

According to Jesse Fleming, comparative studies—particularly those comparing Eastern and Western philosophical ideas, theories, systems, and traditions—are often criticized as "pointless comparisons of apples and oranges" (259), suggesting that Eastern and Western philosophies are too disparate to yield meaningful comparisons. Despite this assertion, which may seem specious, scholars continue to employ comparative methods in cultural studies due to the essential role of these approaches in transcultural and interdisciplinary research. The practice of Sino-Western comparative study predates the formal establishment of comparative studies as an academic discipline. Nonetheless, this field has frequently been dominated by theories of cultural superiority, often implying the superiority of Western culture over Chinese culture or suggesting that Chinese culture is derived from Western influences. Wiebke Denecke refers to this approach as "ellipsis" (13). For instance, Cecil Maurice Bowra and Ernst Robert Curtius have claimed that Chinese culture lacks the epic tradition characteristic of European cultures.[1] Similarly, it has often been asserted that "there is no tradition of tragedy in Chinese literature" (Wallace 99). Perhaps the most notorious example of this "ellipsis" is the longstanding debate over whether "there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy" (Defoort 393), a question first posed by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel more than 200 years ago. Many of these perspectives, we argue, are both problematic and chauvinistic. Such academic prejudices often stem from Western scholars' misunderstandings about the relationship between terminology and substance. For example, the term "philosophy" was not used in China until it was introduced by the Japanese scholar Nishi Amane in 1873.[2] However, this does not imply that China lacked philosophical thought. In reality, China and the West share numerous common perspectives, especially in their early poetics. This paper aims to demonstrate that there are heterogeneous similarities between Chinese and Western poetics from their respective formative periods—the pre-Qin period in China (479 BC-221 BC) and ancient Greece (500

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1   See Marie Chan, "Chinese Heroic Poems and European Epic," *Comparative Literature* 2 (1974): 142-143.

2   See Carube Defoort, "Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy? Arguments of an Implicit Debate," *Philosophy East and West* 3 (2001): 394.

BC-336 BC)—particularly when viewed through the lens of Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism[1]. By "poetics," we refer to a broader conception that encompasses literature, philosophy, rhetoric, music, and other related disciplines as an integrated whole, rather than adhering strictly to Aristotle's definition. Additionally, the term "heterogeneous similarity" indicates that, while Sino-Western poetics may appear different in name, they are essentially similar in their actual substance.

The comparative study of China and Greece, a subset of Sino-Western comparative studies, particularly values the comparison between pre-Qin China and ancient Greece. This focus on specific periods and regions is justified by the fact that both cultures existed during what Karl Jaspers termed the Axial Age, a period roughly spanning from the eighth to the third centuries BC. Jaspers describes this era as "an interregnum between two ages of great empire, a pause for liberty, a deep breath bringing the most lucid consciousness" (51). During this formative period of human civilization, both pre-Qin China and ancient Greece developed remarkable and original cultures independently, due to the vast geographical distance and limited means of transportation that prevented recorded communication between the two regions. As Derk Bodde asserts, "Chinese civilization, though not as autochthonous as once supposed, was founded and subsequently developed in relative isolation from other civilizations of comparable level" (291-292). The "Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought" during the pre-Qin period coincided with a golden age of academic prosperity in ancient Greece. In such heterogeneous cultural contexts, Chinese and Western poetics naturally differed in language, fundamental concepts, and modes of expression. The literary terms and theories of ancient Chinese scholars were so unique and metaphysical that they posed significant challenges for Western scholars to comprehend. Steven Van Zoeren notes,

> There are nevertheless difficulties in discussing the history of traditional Chinese poetic criticism and theory. The language of criticism was allusive and metaphorical, and critics combined a passion for key terms with an almost total disinterest in the problems of their definition. Instead, writers on literature assumed a complex web of continuities and analogies between and within the natural and social/cultural worlds that worked to subvert and evade analytic distinctions. (146)

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1   See Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 189-207; Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383-398.

Despite these linguistic and methodological differences, there remains the potential to explore the heterogeneous similarities between pre-Qin China and ancient Greece, especially from the perspective of ethical literary criticism.

Ethical Instruction

The first similarity in poetics shared by scholars of pre-Qin and ancient Greece is that they both emphasized the utilitarian purpose of literature. According to Nie Zhenzhao, "If we closely examine the history of literature, we will find that literature has always been utilitarian and that its political inclination has consistently been a fundamental characteristic. Even in the works of aestheticist writers, non-utilitarian literature remains merely a utopian ideal, as their creations have never transcended morality and are marked by evident moralistic features" ("On the Ethical Value and Instructive Function of Literature" 13). In the view of Nie Zhenzhao, The "Four Books" and "Five Classics" of the pre-Qin era were primarily used for instruction. The Confucianism particularly highlighted poetry and music as the means through which political ideals were to be achieved. Starting with "poetic education," Confucius (551 BC-479 BC) spoke highly of the social functions of literature. He says, "Get your start with the Odes; acquire a firm standing through ritual; complete the process with music" (Confucius 55). To "get your start with the Odes" means that one must first learn poetry if he wants to cultivate his moral character, while to "complete the process with music" indicates that the improvement of human nature relies on the nurture of music. Therefore, poetry and music are of great importance in the cultivation of a person's moral integrity. Also in this book, Confucius says, "The Odes train you in analogy, allow you to observe customs, teach you to be sociable, teach you to express anger" (122). This saying serves as a good summarization of the functions of poetry, and has exerted great influence on the theories of Chinese literature for thousands of years.

Xun Zi (310 BC-237 BC), another important representative of the Confucianism, also emphasized the social functions of literature and art, holding that the mutual use of ritual and music can achieve the goal of rectifying personal conduct, extending construction so as to produce personal reform and refining popular customs and usages.[1] In the history of Chinese literature, Xun Zi was the first scholar who proposed the theory of equilibrium and harmony, which deepened the theory of moral education and transformation of Confucianism. He noted that man could not live without music. Originating from sound and being produced from movements,

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1   See Xun Zi, *Xunzi* Vol. 1, translated by John Knoblock, Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House, 1999, 249.

music enters deeply into men and rapidly transforms them. Moderate and tranquil music is of particular importance in making people harmonious and in encouraging them to shun excess, while stern and majestic music makes people well-behaved and encourage them to shun disorder. Xun Zi observes, "Thus musical performances are the greatest creator of uniformity in the world, the guiding line of the mean and of harmony, and a necessary and inescapable expression of man's emotional nature" (2:653). Moreover, Xun Zi holds that the sage kings founded music to make good the hearts of the people, as it played the role of "harmony" in coordinating human social relations emotionally. Therefore, the ideal state of music in harmonizing all kinds of people was:

> Hence, when music is performed within the ancestral temple, lord and subject, high and low, listen to the music together and are united in feelings of reverence; when music is played in the private quarters of the home, father and son, elder and younger brother, listen to it together and are united in feelings of close kinship; when it is played in village meetings or clan halls, old and young listen to the music together and are joined in obedience. (2:651)

The aforesaid "reverence," "close kinship" and "obedience" all refer to the social education functions of music. Disagreeing with Mencius' arguments that human nature was originally good and ritual propriety was out of a heart of "courtesy" and "deference," Xun Zi believes that, as contention and indulgence in extravagance are human nature, "Thus, to follow inborn nature and true feelings is not to show courtesy or defer to others. To show courtesy and to defer to others contradicts the true feelings inherent in his inborn nature" (2:749). That is to say, there is a strong desire for extravagance in human nature; if the desires cannot be guided by ritual propriety and music, they will fall into pruriency. Therefore, to get rid of the evils of human nature, "cultivation through the way of Kings" must be promoted so as to make people embrace kindness. To this end, advocating decent music that emphasizes integration of kindness and goodness is a sensible choice.

> As long as it is literature, whether modern or contemporary, Western or Chinese, instruction is its most fundamental function. It can even be said that literature without instruction does not exist. The heroic ideals, national concepts, familial values, and the ethics and morals of society and individuals in ancient Greece were all disseminated and accepted because of Homer's epics. The basic characteristic of ancient Greek tragedy is its ethical nature.

(Nie, "On the Ethical Value and Instructive Function of Literature" 14)

The two major sources of Western aesthetics are Plato and Aristotle, who attached great importance to the functions of literature in guiding and educating people. Plato's denial of Greek literature was not because he had not recognized its social influence; on the contrary, it was precisely because he had deep understanding of its influence that he adopted an extreme utilitarian attitude toward this issue. According to Plato, both the Homeric epics and tragicomedies were bad not only because they destroyed the God-hero worship in the Greek religion, but also because they released, and even nurtured, the "inferior part" of the human souls—as a result of which "justice" was destroyed. Therefore, in the third volume of *The Republic*, Plato expelled those poets who were engaged in creating honeyed lyrics and epics. If a poet wants to stay in the Republic, he or she must write good poetry: "For we mean to employ for our souls' health the rougher and severer poet or story-teller, who will imitate the style of the virtuous only, and will follow those models which we prescribed at first when we began the education of our soldiers" (Plato, *The Republic* 64). In the tenth volume of *The Republic*, Plato reiterated his prohibition: " [...] we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State" (*The Republic* 233). Plato's intention of expelling poets, and in keeping the few poems that could motivate man's rationalism and kindness, is completely based on the edificatory functions of poetry, which indicates that he attached importance to the educative role of literature. Therefore, Plato was the first in the Western world to use the political education effects as the evaluation criterion of literature. Subsequently, this exerted influence over the views of Jean Jasques Rousseau and Leo Tolstoy on literature.[1]

Plato's expelling poets was exactly the same as Confucius' deleting poetry and correcting music. According to Sima Qian (145 BC-87 BC),

There were more than three thousand ancient songs, but Confucius rejected those which were repetitious and retained those which had moral value [...] Confucius choose three hundred and five songs in all, and these he set to music and song, fitting them to the music of Emperor Shun and King Wu. After that the old rites and music became widely known, to the enrichment of the kingly culture, and the Six Classics were established. (270)

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1   See Zhu Guangqian, *History of Western Aesthetics*, Beijing: Press of People's Literature, 1979, 56.

To correct the music, Confucius strongly opposed the emerging folk songs of the states of Zheng and Wei, saying that "for music, the Shao and Wu. Do away with the Zheng tunes and stay away from artful talkers. The Zheng tunes are excessive, and artful talkers are dangerous" (107-108). Confucius believes that the excessive expression of emotion and honeyed folk songs can make people confused and cause them to become bad. Therefore, he equated the honeyed folk songs with those artful and dangerous talkers. From this perspective, it can be seen that Confucius had an in-depth understanding of the role of literature and art in cultivating moral character.

On the issue of the functions of literature, Aristotle went further than Plato. He argues that literature can meet some natural demands of humankind, which is good to the healthy development of the people and the society at large. Aristotle defines tragedy and its function as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form, with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" (*On the Art of Poetry, with a Preface by Gilbert Murray* 35). Unfortunately, Aristotle did not explicate the "catharsis" function in definite terms, which led to various interpretations by later scholars. Despite the heterogeneity of interpretation, there is still consensus regarding the literal meanings of the word "catharsis." According to Eva Schaper, "catharsis" means "purgation" in a medical context, a kind of "healing and curing through expulsion and evacuation of harmful elements;" while, in a religious context, it means "purification," a kind of "cleansing the spirit and sublimating the emotions in order to prepare for or to achieve a state of exaltation" (132). Nowadays more and more scholars turn to interpret this word from the viewpoint of spiritual purgation. Through music, literature and other types of art, some strong emotions of human beings can be relieved and their psychological health can be improved. After experiencing this spiritual purification, people feel good and experience harmless pleasure. This view of Aristotle was dramatically opposed to that of Plato. According to Plato, emotions and pleasures were "inferior part" of the soul and must be suppressed; as poetry "nurtures" them, poets ought not to be admitted into the Republic. "So we were right not to admit him [the poet] into a city that is to be well-governed, for he arouses, nourishes, and strengthens this part of the soul and so destroys the rational one, in just the way that someone destroys the better sort of citizens when he strengthens the vicious ones and surrenders the city to them" (Plato, *The Republic* 276). In addition, Aristotle believes that the purification effect of tragedy on audience had its own cognitive value and ethical purpose. In his opinion, the aim of a tragedy should

not be the tragedy itself, nor should it be the enraptured state of audience. Rather, it should deliver wisdom and give enlightenment, letting audience recognize and practice "thrift" life. Although Aristotle inherited Plato's ideas of "literary value," he attached more importance to the "poetic education" of literature. Through the theory of catharsis, Aristotle explicated the functions of "tragedy" and other forms of literature.

Principle of Ethical Harmony

The second similarity in poetics shared by scholars of the pre-Qin era and ancient Greece is their emphasis on the principle of harmony in the creation of literature and art. Philosophically, harmony refers to a state of balance, order, and congruity within a system and can be applied in various contexts, such as metaphysical, aesthetic, psychological, social-political, and ethical. When applied ethically, "harmony" denotes balance and coherence within an individual's moral life or within a society. Perfect harmony within an individual or a society involves aligning an individual's actions with the moral order of society to achieve "harmony without uniformity." As Sidney Zink notes, "From the time of the early Greek philosophers, the concept of 'harmony' has been popular in ethical discussion" (557). Its ethical meaning is often associated with "good" (Zink 558) by later philosophers such as Leonard Hobhouse, George Santayana, John Perry, and John Dewey. This ethical sense of "harmony" aligns with Nie Zhenzhao's ethical selection of good and evil. According to Nie, "The notion of good and evil emerges along with ethical consciousness and is used to evaluate human beings only. In this sense, good and evil constitute the basis of ethics" ("Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection" 386). Furthermore, Nie Zhenzhao explicates "harmony" from a social-political perspective. In his work "Interchange of Different Civilizations and Construction of a Harmonious World," Nie Zhenzhao argues that "although different cultures often vary in form, content, and aesthetic tastes, they, as a common heritage of humanity, can achieve mutual communication, understanding, and tolerance, even to the extent of learning from, absorbing, and integrating with each other. This process can lead to the evolution of more vibrant new cultures and become an important factor in building a harmonious world" (109).

Nie Zhenzhao's ethical thinking about "harmony," alongside the ideas of other modern philosophers, helps us reveal the heterogeneous similarity of harmony between pre-Qin and ancient Greek scholars.

The "Doctrine of the Mean" was a fundamental principle of Confucian philosophy. Confucius applied this principle to aesthetics, insisting that various

opposing elements in literature and art should be harmoniously unified without emphasizing one side to the exclusion of the other. The appropriateness of the unity and development of these opposing elements was a central tenet of Confucius' aesthetic criticism. His pursuit of harmony and unity is particularly evident in the emotional expression of poetry and music. Confucius states, "The three hundred poems of the *Book of Odes* may be summed up in a single phrase: Think nothing base" (20). From an artistic perspective, the critical criterion of "thinking nothing base" aims to advocate the beauty of "equilibrium and harmony." In music, equilibrium and harmony manifest as a moderate and peaceful melody. Based on this, Confucius proposed the principle of "joy, but not excessive; sadness, but not to the point of injury" (29). In Confucius' view, the "Guanju Ode," a famous love poem from the *Book of Odes*, exemplifies this principle through its implicit and mild emotional expression, starting with emotional love and ending with virtue. Regarding literary works, the principles of "joy but with no excessiveness" and "sadness but not to the point of injury" require that literary works be euphemistic and implicit in their content and wording.

Xun Zi emphasized harmony as the defining characteristic of musical art, advocating for "harmony" in "diversity." He posited that harmony stands in contrast to uniformity, as the latter merely adds repetition without innovation. In contrast, only the harmony of diverse elements can produce something new. Xun Zi also underscored the importance of peace and moderation in music, stating: "Hence for musical performances, the pitch of the prime note is set in order to determine the proper pitch of the other notes. The temperament of the other instruments is adjusted to match in order to prepare the modal key" (2:652). Thus, setting the prime note to determine the pitch of the others illustrates the "guiding principle of the mean and harmony." This means that a central note is established as the prime note, serving as the foundation upon which other notes are organized to create harmonious music.

Similarly, the aesthetic ideal of ancient Greek philosophers was to discover an eternal law governing diverse aesthetic phenomena, aiming to achieve an ideal state of unity, order, harmony, and perfection. In Greek mythology, there is even a goddess named Harmonia, the daughter of Ares, the god of war, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty. As the offspring of war and love, Harmonia symbolizes the harmonization of opposites. Pythagoras and Heraclitus, philosophers predating Plato and Aristotle, both proposed theories asserting that beauty lies in the harmonious unity of opposites. The Pythagoreans believed that the universe was fundamentally composed of harmony and number, and that music represented a harmonious unity of opposite elements, transforming multiplicity into oneness

and chaos into order. Aristotle provided a vivid, though sarcastic, summary of the Pythagoreans' views on the relationship between number, music, and harmony in his *Metaphysics*:

> They [the Pythagoreans] saw that the modifications and the ratios of the musical scales were expressible in numbers; since then, all other things seemed in their whole nature to be modeled on numbers, and numbers seemed to be the first things in the whole of nature, they supposed the elements of numbers to be the elements of all things, and the whole heaven to be a musical scale and a number. And all the properties of numbers and scales which they could show to agree with the attributes and parts and the whole arrangement of the heavens, they collected and fitted into their scheme; and if there was a gap anywhere, they readily made additions so as to make their whole theory coherent. (9)

The Pythagorean conception of the harmonious unity of numbers and music becomes clearer and more defined in Heraclitus' assertion that the harmony of the world is a harmony of oppositions. Heraclitus argues that "from things that differ comes the fairest attunement" and that "all things are born through strife" (46). To Heraclitus, the entire universe is the attunement of opposites, such as day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, surfeit and hunger. However, all these opposites are ultimately attuned in God. Plato inherited the theory of harmonious opposition. When discussing the duality of love, Plato expressed his unique perspective on harmony, stating, "to speak of a harmony as being in disagreement with itself, or as existing when it is composed of elements still in disagreement, is quite absurd [...] Here it is music that creates agreement in all these things by implanting mutual love and unanimity between the different elements" (*The Symposium* 19-20). Additionally, Plato believes that the highest form of beauty is an "idea," which is "eternal" and "does not come into being or perish, nor does it grow or waste away" (*The Symposium* 40). All other beautiful objects are derived from this "idea," and they are merely imitations of this "idea" of beauty.

In Aristotle's poetics, the concept of harmony is rooted in the idea of organic integrity, which he frequently emphasizes when discussing poetry and other arts. This organic integrity reflects the internal laws of development within the content. Integrity consists of parts, and the principle that combines these parts is their internal logic. In his *Politics*, Aristotle states, "there is a similar combination of qualities in good men, who differ from any individual of the many, as the beautiful are said to differ from those who are not beautiful, and works of art from realities,

because in them the scattered elements are combined, although, if taken separately, the eye of one person or some other feature in another person would be fairer than in the picture" (*The Politics of Aristotle: Introduction and Translation* 86). In his *Poetics* or *On the Art of Poetry*, Aristotle defines a "whole" as:

> that which has beginning, middle, and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as it's necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes; beginning and end in it must be of the forms just described. (*On the Art of Poetry, with a Preface by Gilbert Murray* 40)

Because the arrangement of various elements reveals their proportional size and order, forming an organic whole, harmony is thereby achieved. Concerning whether something is beautiful, Aristotle observes, "to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude. Beauty is a matter of size and order [...]" (*On the Art of Poetry, with a Preface by Gilbert Murray* 40). Therefore, after further developing the concept of harmony and beauty, Aristotle concluded that the structure of dramatic poetry is also an integral whole composed of parts.

Principle of Moral Passion and Inspiration

The third similarity in poetics shared by scholars of pre-Qin China and ancient Greece is the function of moral passion and inspiration in literary and artistic creation. This concept, referred as "poeta" in classical literary theory, involves the transformation of ethical emotions into literature and art. In artistic works, poetry often serves to illustrate this process. Theories that explain how emotions are transformed into art include the association theory focusing on psychological experiences of association, the empathy theory centering on the concept of empathy, the expression theory being based on the principles of expression, and the isomorphism theory being founded on Gestalt brain field theory, which posits that the relationship between human emotions and artistic forms is heterogeneously isomorphic. According to Nie Zhenzhao, "regardless of all the theories, none can contradict the logic of the transformation from natural emotions to ethical emotions"

("A Study of Emotion and Poetry" 55). Ethical emotions are a psychological reflection of objective reality, manifesting as subjective experiences, attitudes, and psychological will, all within the realm of subjective consciousness. "Regarding poetry, the subjects of emotions are the poet, the reader, or the critic. Emotions psychologically represent value judgments toward others or things (including abstract concepts). For example, sympathy for the unfortunate, admiration for those who self-sacrifice, and hatred for evildoers can all inspire poetry through emotional responses.[1] Nie Zhenzhao's theory on "poeta" helps reveal the heterogeneous similarity between pre-Qin and ancient Greek scholars concerning the role of emotion and inspiration in literary and artistic creation.

In the pre-Qin period, Mencius' theory of "comprehending speech and nourishing spirits" profoundly influenced literary criticism in subsequent generations. Mencius states

> I am skillful in nourishing my vast, flowing passion-nature [...] This is the passion-nature: it is exceedingly great and exceedingly strong. Being nourished by rectitude, sustaining no injury, it fills up all between heaven and earth. This is the passion-nature: it is the mate and assistant of righteousness and reason. Without it, man is in a state of starvation. It is produced by the accumulation of righteous deeds; it is not to be obtained by incidental acts of righteousness. (189-190)

Mencius believes that the internal beauty of spiritual character is a prerequisite for an author to create beautiful and decent expressions. Once applied in literary creation, Mencius' thought emphasized that writers must first cultivate their moral personality before they can produce good literary works. This relates to the subjective activity of writers. Although Mencius' "vast, flowing passion-nature" emphasized moral spirit and was of pure rational content, it also represented an internally irrepressible passion, full of strong will. To some extent, the "vast, flowing passion-nature" can be seen as a mental state produced by the interplay of emotional will and moral ethics. Without this "vast, flowing passion-nature," writers and artists cannot generate creative impulses and, therefore, cannot achieve success in artistic creation.

The literary theories of ancient Greece also emphasized the subjective activity of writers, including their talent, passion, and inspiration. Plato attributed the subjective activity of poets to their inspiration, which he viewed as divine madness

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1   See Nie Zhenzhao, "A Study of Emotion and Poetry," *Shandong Social Sciences* 8 (2014): 58.

bestowed by the gods, propelling poets into a frenzied state of creation. In the "Ion," Plato repeatedly emphasizes that:

> For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed […]. like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but not when they are in their right mind. And the soul of the lyric poet does the same…For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles. (*Selected Dialogues of Plato* 9-10)

Plato's attribution of poetic creation to irrational "divine madness," setting rationality in opposition to inspiration and equating talent with inspiration, undoubtedly sowed the seeds of irrationality for later artistic creations. From the perspective of artistic creation methods, Plato primarily represented a romantic tendency. With the rise of romanticism in the late 18th century, the idea that literature was the expression of writers' inspiration and passion became a worldwide literary trend, subsequently forming the critical tradition of romanticism, characterized by the shift "from imitation to expression and from the mirror to the fountain, to the lamp" (Abrams 57).

Unlike Plato, who attributed inspiration to divine madness, Aristotle required poets to possess good senses. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle states, "At the time when he is constructing his Plots, and engaged on the Diction in which they are worked out, the poet should remember to put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the vividness of an eye-witness as it were, he will devise what is appropriate, and be least likely to overlook incongruities" (*On the Art of Poetry, with a Preface by Gilbert Murray* 60-61). These words indicate Aristotle's belief that poets should employ their creativity and subjective activity to reveal the essence and internal relations of the world to be imitated. To Aristotle, Plato's mysterious "idea" was no more than the universality of particularity. Universality could not exist without particularity and existed within it. The "idea" was not the other shore of reality but the "possibility" and the "cause" of everything. Like a seed or an embryo, the "idea" contains the potential for growth and realization. Therefore, a poet's imitation of nature in artistic creation is no longer passive but an active creation, turning the possibility of imitating nature into reality. In discussing poetic imitation, Aristotle held that "the poet being an imitator just like the painter or other maker of likenesses, he must necessarily in all instances represent things in

one or other of three aspects, either as they were or are, or as they are said or thought to be or to have been, or as they ought to be" (*On the Art of Poetry, with a Preface by Gilbert Murray* 85-86). The third case, namely, imitating things as they ought to be, emphasizes a poet's subjective intention in artistic creation. Aristotle's assertion that "poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history" (*On the Art of Poetry, with a Preface by Gilbert Murray* 43) was based on the idea that history tends to express the particular, as historians have no creative space, while poetry tends to express the universal, as poets can actively use their imagination and subjective activity to create works. Therefore, if a poet uses historical events as the materials for their creation, they must use their soul to conquer the chaotic, accidental, and unintelligible materials, making their poetry unified and harmonious in form and content.

Ethics of Rhetoric

One important similarity between pre-Qin scholars and those of ancient Greece is their use of rhetoric as an effective means of discourse. In his work "Where Goes Forth Chinese Literary Theory," Nie Zhenzhao criticizes the current state of Chinese literary theory, stating: "With the increasing dominance of Western theoretical discourse, the study of Chinese literary theory, amidst the surge of reform and opening up, did not merely open a window to the West or even two large doors, but instead dismantled barriers and tore down walls. Our academic community has almost completely adopted Western literary theory" (11-12). James J. Murphy also highlights this issue in his discussion of rhetoric, mockingly asserting that "it is important to note at once that rhetoric is an entirely Western phenomenon" (1). George A. Kennedy supports this view by arguing that rhetoric existed in Greece only because it was named as such. These chauvinistic assertions are patently absurd, as Edward Schiappa humorously points out with an analogy: "Just because the Greek texts of a period do not use a word for urination does not mean that no one was urinating at the time" (21). To address the dominance of Western literary theories in China, Nie Zhenzhao suggests the following approach: "Based on ourselves, we draw on and absorb foreign elements, use Western practices for our own needs, innovate and develop, and build our own theoretical framework on the foundation of Western theories" ("Where Goes Forth Chinese Literary Theory" 13). The phrase "based on ourselves" implies that China, particularly ancient China, possesses a rich tradition of literary theories, which should be utilized in the creation of new literary theories that are characteristic of Chinese style.

Regarding the theory of rhetoric, Pre-Qin scholars not only attributed the same

importance to rhetoric as an effective discourse as the scholars in ancient Greece but also coined the term "xiuci" (the Chinese term for rhetoric) even before Plato coined the term "rhetoric." This is evidenced by the famous Chinese phrase "xiuci li qi cheng" (polished expressions are to be based on sincerity) (Kao 143-154), which appeared in *The Book of Change*, a text written during the Western Zhou Dynasty (roughly 1027 BC-770 BC). The major difference between Eastern and Western approaches to rhetoric is that "in the East, rhetoric has been considered so important that it could not be separated from the remainder of human knowledge," whereas "in the West, rhetoric has been considered to be so important that it has had to be explored and delineated separately, as a special field of knowledge about human relations" (Oliver 10). The essential similarity between Pre-Qin rhetoricians and ancient Greek rhetoricians is their shared emphasis on the importance of ethical sincerity, trust, or credibility in rhetorical persuasion, with the exception of the Pre-Qin school of Mingjia and the Greek sophists. As mentioned earlier, "xiuci li qi cheng," which was established as a rule in rhetoric as early as the Western Zhou Dynasty, was followed by the thinkers of Confucianism, Mohism, Daoism, and Legalism, albeit articulated differently. For instance, Confucius, who traveled extensively to preach his politics of benevolence, understood the importance of rhetoric in persuasion. In Confucian discourse, "cheng" (sincerity) was explicated as the rectification of names and was regarded as playing a crucial role in the advocacy of social order. He observes,

> If names are not rectified, then speech will not function properly, and if speech does not function properly, then undertakings will not succeed. If undertakings do not succeed, then rites and music will not flourish. If rites and music do not flourish, then punishments and penalties will not be justly administered. And if punishments and penalties are not justly administered, then the common people will not know where to place their hands and feet. (Confucius 88)

In Aristotelian rhetoric, ethos, logos, and pathos are three indispensable modes of persuasion, among which ethos bears a similarity to the ethical sincerity emphasized in Pre-Qin rhetoric. Ethos, in the Greek sense, means "moral character." In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle argues that "character" played an important role in oration: "But since rhetoric exists to affect the giving of decisions—the hearers decide between one political speaker and another, and a legal verdict is a decision—the orator must not only try to make the argument of his speech demonstrative and worthy of belief; he must also make his own character look right and put his hearers, who are to

decide, into the right frame of mind" (59).

The similarities between Pre-Qin rhetoric and ancient Greek rhetoric are particularly evident in the rhetorical ideas of the School of Mingjia, represented by Deng Xi (560 BC-501 BC), Hui Shi (370 BC-310 BC), and Gongsun Long (325 BC-250 BC), and the sophists, represented by Protagoras (ca. 490 BC-420 BC) and Gorgias (ca. 483 BC-375 BC). Unfortunately, most of the original works by the Mingjia School and the sophists have been lost, and their ideas are known primarily through the comments of other rhetorical thinkers such as Xun Zi, Confucius, and Aristotle. For instance, Xun Zi criticizes the Mingjia School, stating that they "are fond of treating abstruse theories, and playing with shocking propositions [...] Nonetheless, some of what they advocate has a rational basis, and their statements have perfect logic, enough indeed to deceive and mislead the ignorant masses. Such men are Hui Shi and Deng Xi" (127). Similarly, Aristotle, in his "Sophistical Refutations," defines sophists disparagingly: "For the art of the sophist is the semblance of wisdom without the reality, and the sophist is one who makes money from an apparent but unreal wisdom" (165a). Both schools shared the concept of multiple probabilities in human life and recognized the power of language in debate and persuasion. As Xing Lu observes, "In many ways, Mingjia resembled the Greek sophists [...]" (129). For instance, Protagoras' famous claim that "humans are the measure of all things, of things that are that (or: how) they are, and of things that are not that (or: how) they are not," according to Van Norden and William Bryan, parallels Deng Xi's advocacy that "both arguments are acceptable" (Norden 102), which was termed "liang ke" (dual possibilities) and "liang shuo" (dual interpretations). A vivid illustration of Deng Xi's theory of dual possibilities and dual interpretations is expressed in an anecdote in "Lü Shi Chun Qiu":

> The Wei River is very great in size. A wealthy man from Zheng drowned in it, and someone retrieved his body. The wealthy man's family sought to buy it, but the one who found the body was asking a great deal of money. The family reported this to Deng Xi, who said 'Do not worry about this. He certainly can sell it to no one else.' The man who found the corpse was anxious about this and reported this to Deng Xi, who told him, 'Do not worry about it. They certainly will be unable to buy the corpse from someone else. (Lyu 454)

This anecdote about Deng Xi illustrates that the human faculty of reasoning determines the truth of an issue, rather than moral appeal or divine intervention. If an argument is logically convincing and well-presented, truth can be found on either

side of the issue. This is why both the sophists and the School of Mingjia were often accused of lacking ethical sincerity or moral sense in their rhetorical practices.

Guided by Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism, this paper examines the heterogeneous similarities between pre-Qin poetics and that of the ancient Greek. It finds that the development of Chinese and Western poetics occurred within the context of distinct cultures, without mutual contact, exchange, or influence. Despite differences in specific content and modes of expression, Chinese and Western poetics share fundamental views about the nature and function of literature, art, and rhetoric. Highlighting these heterogeneous similarities in their respective origins not only challenges the longstanding theories of Chinese ellipsis or Western superiority prevalent in comparative studies but also enhances Western scholars' understanding of Chinese culture, particularly ancient Chinese culture.

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