MEANING, RECEPTION, AND THE USE OF CLASSICS: THEORITICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN A CHINESE CONTEXT

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Abstract: Reception seems to have invigorated classic studies and become a major way to talk about the history and function of classics in the past and in our own time. Reception theory maintains that meaning is always mediated, and that there is no originary moment when the classics are what they "really are" before any reading and interpretation. In the history of reception, classics have indeed been interpreted from different ideological and political stances and made use of in different time periods. Facing the various uses of classics, some of which evidently deviate from the textual meaning in an allegorical interpretation, it becomes a significant problem—how does one define the validity of interpretation and guard against "overinterpretation" (Umberto Eco) or "hermeneutic nihilism" (H. G. Gadamer)? This paper will discuss such theoretical issues in the context of Chinese reading and commentaries on the classics, both Chinese and Western, and suggest a way to reach a balance between the classics and their interpretations.

I. Reception Theory and Classical Studies

According to Charles Martindale, Professor of Latin at the University of Bristol, reception theory has invigorated the study of Greek and Roman classics in the UK and the US, with such academic indicators as conference panels and course offerings on both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as a special category set up for the purpose of research assessment of classical studies, and as publisher's requirement of a substantial reception element to be included in such book series as *Cambridge Companions to* ancient authors, etc. The adaptation of reception theory, says Martindale, has become "perhaps the fastest-growing area of the subject" since the early 1990s.[1] As he acknowledges, reception theory originated in Hans Robert Jauss' argument for a paradigmatic change in the study of literary history, his plea for paying critical attention to the historicity of interpretation or what he called *Rezeptionsästhetik*, which in turn owes a great deal to Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, particularly the concept of the "fusion of horizons."[2] If we look at reception theory and indeed Gadamerian hermeneutics in the context of 20th-century intellectual history, we may see that they form part of the general tendency in the postwar world towards a more open and more self-consciously historical perspective that moves away from the 19th-century positivistic beliefs in the objectivity, progress, and scientific truth in human understanding and knowledge. "Understanding is not, in fact, understanding

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[1]Charles Martindale, "Introduction: *Thinking Through Reception*," in Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas (eds.), *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 2.

[2]See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed., translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 306.

better," as Gadamer puts it. "It is enough to say that we understand in a *different* way, *if we understand at all*."[3] This remark clearly indicates the shift of emphasis in modern hermeneutics from a stable meaning in a correct understanding based on the recovery of the authorial intention to the variability of meaning based on the diversity of subjective perspectives or horizons. People understand differently because they have different subjective positions, and recognition of the important role played by that subjectivity necessarily leads to the recognition of the reader's or the spectator's function in *making sense* in understanding and interpretation.

In Jauss' argument, a literary work is "not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period," but it is "much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence."[4] The idea that a literary work is not immobile, but always changing in the aesthetic experience of reading as a "contemporary existence," can be traced to Gadamer's discussion of the work of art as play, which is always a "*presentation for an audience*."[5] Reception theory can be said to have built on Gadamer's understanding of art as play and the experience of art as participation, on the concept of "contemporaneity," which means, as Gadamer explains, "that in its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be. Thus contemporaneity is not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a task for consciousness and an achievement that is demanded of it."[6] That is to say, in a spectator's or a reader's aesthetic experience, the work of art achieves full presence in the consciousness and becomes something that exists at the present moment, "contemporaneous" with the reader's consciousness, even though the work itself may originate in a remote past. From this we may conclude that meaning of a literary work or a classic is always the merging of what the work says and what the reader understands it as saying in the contemporary situation, a Gadamerian "fusion of horizons." The study of reception is thus the study of how the fusion of horizons happens in the reading of a classic, and how the changes of horizons constitute the history of a classic's reading and interpretation. Reception acknowledges the historicity of understanding, and sees all texts, including the classics, as having their meaning generated in the encounter between the text and the reader.

Precisely on the concept of the classical, however, Jauss parted company with Gadamer. For Gadamer, the classical is "something raised above the vicissitudes of changing times and changing tastes."[7] Here a crucial element of textual constancy or normative sense is introduced in the understanding of classics beyond changing tastes and trends. "What we call 'classical' does not first require the overcoming of historical distance, for in its own constant mediation it overcomes this distance by itself. The classical," says Gadamer in a significant paradox, "is certainly 'timeless,' but this timelessness is a mode of

[3]Ibid., pp. 296-97.
[4]Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1982), p. 21.
[5]Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 109; emphasis in the original.
[6]Ibid., p. 127.
[7]Ibid., p. 288.

historical being."[8] If Gadamer's rehabilitation of "prejudice" makes many to think of him as a radical relativist, then, his concept of the "timeless classical" seems to make him to look like a conservative traditionalist, but of course both views are mistaken, for "prejudice" is just "pre-judgment" or what Heidegger calls "the existential *fore-structure* of Dasein itself," the very horizon we bring to all understanding, the start of the hermeneutic circle, which contains "a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing."[9] As for the timeless classic, Gadamer consciously stands in a long tradition in biblical hermeneutics from St. Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and to Martin Luther, which maintains that the scripture, or in this case the classical, as Gadamer quotes Hegel as saying, is "that which is self-significant (selbst bedeutende) and hence also self-interpretive (selbst Deutende)."[10] This is not a conservative statement about the timeless classic based on a constant and universal human nature, but a crucial concept of textual integrity that has the power to oppose obfuscating and dogmatic commentaries, as can be seen in Luther's proposal of a radically new understanding of the Bible vis-à-vis Catholic exegeses. I shall come back to this important point later, but Jauss does not like the idea of "timelessness" and believes that such a concept "falls out of the relationship of question and answer that is constitutive of all historical tradition."[11] Jauss's reception theory definitely puts more emphasis on the indeterminacy of meaning in all texts, rather than embracing the normative sense of any text, be it classical, canonical, or scriptural.

Martindale, who follows Jauss closely, likewise emphasizes the changing meaning of the classics and dismisses the idea of an original, recoverable meaning. "The desire to experience, say, Homer in himself untouched by any taint of modernity," says Martindale, "is part of the pathology of many classicists, but it is a deluded desire."[12] Sappho provides yet another example. We know very little about the life of Sappho, but modern critics have understood her as a lesbian. Since we cannot get rid of our modern concept and cannot think otherwise, says Martindale, "why should we seek to pretend otherwise? Whatever the case in Archaic Lesbos, the certainty is that Sappho is now a lesbian (as Emily Wilson wittily puts it, 'it is only a slight exaggeration to say that Baudelaire, through Sappho, invented modern lesbianism, and Swinburne brought it to England'). Should we give up all this richness—in exchange for little or nothing?"[13] There may be some tension between "whatever the case in Archaic Lesbos" and the modern conviction that "Sappho is now a lesbian," but for Martindale, the former is elusive and forever lost, while the latter is "the certainty" achieved in modern criticism despite its 19th-century provenance. There seems a clear privileging of the modern and modern understanding over whatever the ancient condition and its texts might be. In this sense, reception theory puts more emphasis on the reader and the reader's present situation than anything else.

[8]Ibid., p. 290.
[9]Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 195.
[10]G. W. F. Hegel, *Ästhetik*, II, 3, quoted in Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 289.
[11]Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, p. 30.
[12]Martindale, "Introduction," in *Classics and the Uses of Reception*, p. 7.
[13]Ibid., p. 12.

Modern subjectivity gets an even stronger confirmation in William Batstone's remark that "we cannot understand what we do not understand, and so, when we come to understanding (of any thing, of the other) we come to self-understanding."[14] That seems a very strong endorsement of the circularity of the hermeneutic circle, but if all understanding is self-understanding, is there any criterion outside the interiority of the hermeneutic circle, by which we may judge one understanding from the next in terms of persuasiveness or validity? What would be the legitimate ground for differentiating various understandings and interpretations? Or has reception theory with its emphasis on the constructedness of meaning eschewed that question altogether? Batstone brings up the political dimension of this issue when he deliberately asks: "How might Goebbels or Mussolini or even Stauffenberg figure within the claim that Virgil can only be what readers have made of him? These readers require an oppositional reading, a reading that suppresses their ambitions." He puts it provocatively, saying that "Goebbels was right, and that is why Thomas believes in the suppression of Goebbels' reading."[15] But in what sense was Goebbels right? In Batstone's formulation, the politics of reading becomes a pure game of politics but no reading, because a previous reading needs to be suppressed not because it is in any sense wrong or a distortion of the text's proper meaning, but because the regime or political situation has changed. Thus reception theory puts the reader's role to the fore and argues that all understanding is self-understanding, and that all interpretations are imbedded in the social, political, and intellectual conditions of their times. Goebbels's reading needs to be suppressed not because it is invalid, not even because its Nazi ideology is wrong, but only because the Nazis are defeated and its ideology needs to be suppressed by the winner's ideology. In such a formulation, then, the politics of reading is constituted by nothing but political power, in which interpretation is not a matter of validity or invalidity, but a matter of discursive authority totally depending on who has the power to speak.

II. Greek and Roman Classics in China: From the Late Ming to the 1980s

Perhaps we may use the reception of Greek and Latin classics in China as a test case to look into the questions we raised above. The first thing we may notice is that understanding and interpretation of the classics indeed change as the social and historical conditions change in time. The earliest introduction of Greek and Latin classics to China can be dated back to the late Ming dynasty in the late 16th and the early 17th centuries, when the Jesuit missionaries used classical rhetoric for religious purposes. In 1623, Father Giulio Aleni 艾儒略 (1582 – 1649) published a book in Chinese called *Xixue fan* 西學凡 or *Introduction to Western Learning*, in which he described five methodological principles of rhetoric based on the work of Cypriano Soarez's (1524 – 1593) *De arte rhetorica*, which was in turn based on Cicero's works. So Aleni, according to Li Sher-shiueh, produced "the earliest writing in China explicating Cicero's ideas about rhetoric."[16] But

[14]William W. Batstone, "Provocation: *The Point of Reception Theory*," ibid., p. 17.
[15]Ibid., p. 19.
[16]Li Sher-shiueh 李奭學, *Zhongguo wan Ming yu Ouzhou wenxue: Ming mo Yesuhui gudianxing zhengdao gushi kaoquan* 中國晚明與歐洲文學：明末耶穌會古典型證道故

even before that, the Jesuits already used Aesop's fables to convey Christian ideas through intriguing stories about birds and animals, taking advantage of those fables' easily adaptable plots and didactic morals. In so doing, they often altered those fables as exempla for the teaching of Christian doctrine, "reshaped the classical tradition," and engaged in what Harold Bloom calls the act of "misreading."[17] From the late Ming to the modern times, there have been many Chinese translations of Aesop's fables. Ming dynasty translations mostly done by the Jesuits were based on Latin originals, but in the Qing dynasty and the Republican period, translations were mainly from English. "Not until the 1950s and the 1980s," as Ge Baoquan observes, "did we have complete translations from ancient Greek texts."[18] It is noteworthy that the 1950s and the 1980s look like two peaks of translation of the classics and foreign literature in general, while the time in between becomes a gap, a period of self-enclosure in which very little foreign literature or philosophy was considered valuable. This simple statistic already shows the change of the political climate in China, in which Greek and Roman classics are read and interpreted.

Before the 1950s, there were different interpretations of Aesop's fables. Lin Shu (1852 – 1924), who knew no foreign language but worked with assistants knowledgeable in the originals, produced a version in 1903 and said in his preface that "Aesop's book is a book based on knowledge gained from experience; it speaks strangely through conversations of plants, trees, animals, and birds, but they contain eternal verities when one savors them deeply." He compares Aesop's fables favorably with several Chinese collections of similar strange and funny stories and claims that "insofar as the special function of fables is concerned, no book is as good as *Aesop's Fables* in making children laugh and enjoy, and gradually understand the changing human dispositions and the different nature of things."[19] In a satirical essay published in 1941, Qian Zhongshu (1910 – 1998) offers an interesting counterargument, deliberately saying that Aesop's fables are unfit for teaching the young. "Looking at history as a whole," says Qian, "antiquity is the equivalent of mankind's childhood. The past is childish, and having progressed through thousands of years, humanity has gradually reached modern times." [20] Continuing in that sarcastic vein apparently from the perspective of a modern reader confident of his advantage over the ancient writer,

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事考銓 [*Late Ming China and European Literature: The Study of Classical Exempla of the Jesuits at the End of the Ming Dynasty*] (Taipei: Academia Sinica and Linking, 2005), p. 29.

[17]Ibid., p. 86. See Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 3-6.

[18]Ge Baoquan 戈寶權, *Zhong Wai wenxue yinyuan: Ge Baoquan bijiao wenxue lunwen ji* 中外文學姻緣：戈寶權比較文學論文集 [*Relations between Chinese and Foreign Literatures: Ge Baoquan's Essays on Comparative Literature*] (Beijing: Beijing Publishers, 1992), p. 451.

[19] Lin Shu 林紓 (trans.), *Yisuo yuyan* 伊索寓言 [*Aesop's Fables*] (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1920), p. 2.

[20]Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, "Du *Yisuo yuyan*" 讀《伊索寓言》 [Reading *Aesop's Fables*], in *Xie zai rensheng bianshang / Ren shou gui* 寫在人生邊上 / 人、獸、鬼 [*Written on the Margins of Life / Humans, Beasts, Ghosts*] (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 2000), p. 31. For an English translation, see Qian Zhongshu, *Humans, Beasts, and Ghosts: Stories and Essays*, ed. Christopher G. Rea (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 54-57.

Qian claims that Aesop's work contains morals far too simple from the modern man's point of view. For example, the bat that pretends to be a bird among birds, but a mouse among animals, is not sneaky enough. "Man is much smarter," says Qian:

He would do the reverse of the bat's trick. He would pretend to be an animal among birds to show that he is down-to-earth, but a bird among animals to show that he moves above the hustle and bustle of the world. He tries to look refined and cultured in front of the military type, but plays a macho hero in front of men of letters. In the high society, he is an impoverished but hardy commoner, but among commoners, he becomes a condescending intellectual. This is of course not a bat, but just—a man.[21]

As for the fable of an astronomer who falls into a well because he is always looking up at the stars, Qian turns the astronomer into a politician, and thus his fall is "a fall from power or from office." He would never admit, however, that he has fallen because of his carelessness; instead he would declare that he is "deliberately going down to his subordinates to do some investigation work."[22] By reading a number of Aesop's fables in such a twisted way, Qian offers a biting critique of the modern notions of evolution and progress, a satire on the corrupted modern man. Aesop's fables, says Qian in conclusion, are not fit for children, and he mentions that Rousseau in *Emile* also objected to children's reading of fables, though their objections are based on exactly opposite reasons. "Rousseau thought that fables would make simple children complicated and cause them to lose their innocence, so fables are objectionable. But I regard fables as objectionable because they make naive children even more simple-minded and more childish, cause them to believe that the distinction between right and wrong and the consequences of good and evil in the human world are as fairly and clearly set out as in the animal kingdom, and thus when those children grow up, they would easily get duped and encounter difficulties everywhere they turn."[23] Aesop's fables, those stories of beasts, birds, insects and plants, as Annabel Patterson argues, have "their function as a medium of political analysis and communication, especially in the form of a communication from or on behalf of the politically powerless."[24] In the 1950s and after, however, Aesop's fables as "fables of power," the Aesopian language and its political function, all became suspect in a more and more tightly controlled society where the authorities were always on the lookout for political subversion. Satires and parodies became quite impossible, and the kind of ironic reading of Aesop's fables like Qian Zhongshu wrote in the 1940s all but disappeared.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, many intellectuals felt hopeful of a new era for China's rejuvenation after a long period of war and the crisis of national survival, the social and political atmosphere in the early 1950s was relatively relaxed and optimistic. The Soviet Union provided a model for new China, and translation of foreign works, including Western classics, was thriving, though the most translated was Soviet and Russian

[21]Ibid., p. 32.
[22]Ibid., p. 33.
[23]Ibid., p. 36.
[24]Annabel Patterson, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 2.

literature. That "brave new world" euphoria, however, did not last long. In Yan'an in 1941, even before the communists took over the whole country, Mao Zedong already criticized intellectuals within the Communist Party for their predilection for Western learning, complaining that "many scholars of Marxism-Leninism also cite the Greeks whenever they speak."[25] Mao traced this problem of Westernization to the influence of Chinese students returning from Europe, America, or Japan, who "only know how to talk about foreign countries without their own understanding, and thus play the role of mere gramophones."[26] As Mao became the supreme leader in the 1950s, his critique of intellectuals "citing the Greeks whenever they speak" 言必稱希臘 cast a dark shadow on Chinese intellectual life and made it almost impossible to talk about Greek classics in earnest, even though some of the classics were translated and published quietly. Roman classics were even more neglected, however, as Roman civilization had been less appreciated in China. According to Yang Zhouhan, "not until the 1930s did Roman literature become relatively known in China."[27] Virgil was discussed in some essays published in *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 [*Fiction Monthly*] in 1930 and 1931, and Wang Li 王力 published a short history of Roman literature in 1933, but the first Roman work translated into Chinese, Virgil's *Eclogues*, did not appear until 1957. Yang himself translated several classics from Latin: Ovid's *Metamophoses* came out in 1958 and Virgil's *Aeneid* in 1984. Between the late 1950s and the early 1980s, however, there was little to speak of as reception of Greek and Roman classics. With the Anti-Rightist campaign in 1957 and many other political campaigns, the intellectual environment quickly deteriorated, and during the Cultural Revolution that lasted from 1966 to 1976, China was completely closed off to the outside world and nothing foreign was considered of any value in that period of extreme xenophobia.

Interestingly, Karl Marx himself had spoken of the ancient Greeks with marvel and admiration. Given his politico-economic theory of dialectical materialism, the superstructure of arts and ideas should correspond to its material basis in social structure and economic development, and everything in the arts should be accountable in terms of its economic and material basis. But there is a problem in the correspondence of arts and economics, the superstructure and the material base, because it is a well-known fact that "certain periods of the highest development of art stand in no direct connection to the general development of society, or to the material basis and skeleton structure of its organization," says Marx. "Witness the example of the Greeks as compared with the modern nations, or even Shakespeare."[28] Marx saw this as a challenge, the challenge of the classical, for "the difficulty is not in grasping the idea that Greek art and epos are

[25]Mao Zedong 毛澤東, "Gaizao women de xuexi" 改造我們的學習 [Reform our Studies], in *Mao Zedong xuanji* 毛澤東選集 [*Mao Zedong's Selected Works*], 4 vols. (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1966), 3:755.
[26]Ibid., 3:756.
[27]Yang Zhouhan 楊周翰, "Virgil and the Tradition of Chinese Poetry," in *Jingzi he Qi qiao ban: bijiao wenxue luncong* 鏡子和七巧板：比較文學論叢 [*The Mirror and the Jigsaw: Essays in Comparative Literature*] (Beijing: Chinese Social Science Press, 1990), p. 61.
[28]Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 359.

bound up with certain forms of social development. It lies rather in understanding why they still constitute for us a source of aesthetic enjoyment and in certain respect prevail as the standard and model beyond attainment."[29] I shall come back to the question of the classical later, but from this we may see that to cite or speak of the Greeks is not a sin in Marx's eyes.

In China from the 1950s to the 1970s, however, there was an increasingly rigid Party line of materialism and realism in the study of literature and the humanities in general. Anything accused of being idealist would immediately be dismissed as bad or even reactionary, and literature was thought to be a reflection or copy of social reality. In this context, then, it is particularly noteworthy that Qian Zhongshu made use of the Aristotelian theory of representation to refute the rigid dogma of art as "reflection." In his preface to *Selection of Song Dynasty Poetry with Annotations*, first published in 1958, Aristotle was brought in literally from the margins, in the form of a footnote. Qian begins by contextualizing the selected poems in their historical conditions, but quickly dismisses the simplistic understanding of the relationship between poetry and history. "A work of literature is produced in the author's historical milieu and takes root in the reality in which he lives," says Qian, "but the ways in which it reflects the milieu and gives expression to the reality can be multifarious and varied."[30] Poetry may realistically describe the social condition of a time, but realism cannot be the sole criterion to judge the value of poetry, because it is not the main purpose of poetry to depict reality as it is. History "only focuses on the appearance of things," but literature "may probe into the hidden essence of things and bring out the protagonist's unexpressed psychological intricacies"; history "only ascertains what has happened, but art can imagine what should have happened and conjecture why it has so happened. In that sense, we may say that poetry, fiction, and drama are superior to history."[31]

The argument is unmistakably Aristotelian, and Qian directly refers to Aristotle's *Poetics* in a footnote, while drawing on classic Chinese texts, the historical book *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 and a famous poem by the Tang poet Bo Juyi 白居易 (772 – 846), to support Aristotle's view. Both *Zuo zhuan* and the poem *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* have recorded speech of private conversations or even a monologue, which neither the historian nor the poet could have possibly known and taken as actual records, but while the veracity of the historical narrative in *Zuo zhuan* has been put into question, readers have always accepted Bo Juyi's poem without accusing the poet of lying.[32] The clear distinction in Chinese readers' reactions towards historical narrative and poetic imagination effectively points to the distinction of the two kinds of discourse, thus consolidating Aristotle's view in *Poetics* as well as Qian's oblique critique of the Maoist doctrine of literature as a mechanical copying or reflection of reality. No wonder that Qian's work was under attack soon after its publication, for the orthodox Party line of a rigid "reflection" theory could not stand up to scrutiny, and

[29]Ibid., p. 360.
[30]Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, *Song shi xuan zhu* 宋詩選注 [*Selection of Song Dynasty Poetry with Annotations*] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1958), p. 3.
[31]Ibid., pp. 4-5.
[32]See ibid., p. 5.

therefore no scrutiny was allowed to question the authority of the "reflection" theory.

When the extreme anti-intellectualism was finally over after the ten-year disastrous Cultural Revolution, translation of Western classics experienced a revival in the 1980s, when many old translations were reprinted and new ones were attempted. The whole 1980s consciously continued what had been left unfinished during the May Fourth period at the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly in reaching out to Western ideas and values of science and democracy. Economically China was opening up and making changes, and the intellectual sphere was also opening up and filled with hopes and enthusiasm for political reform. Perhaps Gu Zhun's (1915 – 1974) work on Greek city-states and democracy, first published in 1982, best represents the 1980s and the aspirations for political change among Chinese intellectuals. Through a comparative study of ancient Chinese and Greek political institutions, Gu Zhun articulated the desire for political reform in the post-Mao era. In ancient China, there were many small states and polities that may bear some similarities with the Greek city-states, says Gu, "but the other characteristic of the Greek system that made it possible for those small city-states to retain their independence was totally unknown in ancient China, namely, the power of sovereignty resting with the people and the system of direct democracy."[33] Aristotle's notion of a citizen, which puts emphasis on a citizen's right to participate in the decision-making activities, shows a crucial difference between Greek democracy and the Chinese political system not just in antiquity, but also in our own time. In *Politics*, Aristotle thus defines the concept of a citizen:

Whoever is entitled to participate in an office involving deliberation or decision is, we can now say, a citizen in this city; and the city is the multitude of such persons that is adequate with a view to a self-sufficient life, to speak simply.[34]

Having quoted this important passage from Aristotle, Gu Zhun explains that Greek citizens are the masters of a city-state, and that they have the responsibility to defend the city in war and also the right to participate in the affairs of the state or a court of law. The concept of the rule of law became important both externally in relation with other city-states and internally in governing the transactions and relationships of individual citizens. All these are lacking in the Chinese political system, and Gu Zhun's work inspired many readers to think about the difficulty as well as the necessity of political reform. Indeed, demand of reform and further opening-up characterized the 1980s, which culminated in the students' demonstrations in Beijing in 1989. The bloody suppression of the students' demonstration in Tiananmen was not only a traumatic experience in recent Chinese history, but also marked the point of significant changes in China, the further opening-up in economic policies and the rapid growth of economy, but at the same time also the disintegration of intellectual vision, the rise of nationalism, and the emergence of some scholars who would argue more in line with the state

[33]Gu Zhun 顧準, *Xila chengbang zhidu* 希臘城邦制度 [*The Institution of City-States in Greece*], in *Gu Zhun wenji* 顧準文集 [*Collection of Gu Zhun's Writings*] (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin, 1994), p. 72.

[34]Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1275b, p. 87. Gu Zhun quoted a Chinese version of the book, see *Gu Zhun wenji* [*Collection of Gu Zhun's Writings*], p. 74.

than the individual, for a nationalistic exceptionalism than cosmopolitan aspirations, and in defense of authoritarianism than liberal democracy.

III. Classical Studies in China Today

As we move into the twenty-first century, there have been a number of initiatives in promoting the study of Greek and Roman classics, particularly in some of China's major universities. Peking University established a Centre for Classical Studies in 2011, and similar efforts at teaching Greek and Latin and classical studies also started in Fudan University and a few other places. So in China now there are indeed encouraging signs of serious studies of Western classics. What has attracted more attention, however, is the promotion of classical studies, both Western and Chinese, by two fairly well-known scholars, Liu Xiaofeng and Gan Yang, who occupy prominent positions at People's University in Beijing and Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou respectively, with a journal as a forum to air their views, *Gudian yanjiu* 古典研究 or the *Chinese Journal of Classical Studies*, of which Liu Xiaofeng is editor-in-chief. Neither Liu nor Gan can be called a classicist by any stretch of the imagination, and what they emphasize is not philological knowledge, but annotations and commentaries in Western classical scholarship. For example, Liu Xiaofeng published a Chinese version of Plato's *Symposium* in 2003, which, as he admits in the translator's preface, "is neither directly translated from the Greek original, nor indirectly from a translation in a Western language, but is an experiment of *exegetical* translation—that is, a translation based on several annotated editions by contemporary classicists, in consultation with a number of translations with commentaries in Western languages, and also in comparison with the Greek original." The last phrase is rather disingenuous, as Liu declares that knowledge of the Greek language is not essential, because "even if one has studied ancient Greek for eight to ten years, it is probably still impossible to have the assurance to translate Plato 'directly' from the Greek original."[35] In other words, Liu advocates a translation based not so much on what the text itself says but what a certain classicist or an exegetical tradition has understood it as saying. For him, Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt are the two guiding spirits for his understanding of Plato and the other Greek and Roman classics. Plato's *Symposium*, says Liu, has many different ideas and themes, and its interpretation, very much like the orchestration of a music piece, depends on the skills of a virtuoso performer. "In the hands of a virtuoso (like Strauss), it can unfold its rich meaning in depth," for the *Symposium*, he explains in a footnote, "looks like a discourse on love, but Strauss in his reading reveals the essence of Platonic political philosophy."[36] Political allegories *à la* Strauss become the main approach in Liu Xiaofeng's way of reading Western classics, a methodology that has made it possible for him to interpret Greek and Roman classics in a particular way, to make use of the classics in serving a certain purpose with a strong political orientation.

In her review of the changing reception of ancient Greek classics in China, Shadi Bartsch has insightfully detected a significant "turn" in present-day

[35]Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓 (trans.), *Bolatu de Huiyin* 柏拉圖的《會飲》 [*Plato's Symposium*] (Beijing: Huaxia, 2003), p. 3.
[36]Ibid., p. 2.

Chinese study of Western classics, which evidently differs from the enthusiastic embracement of Western classics and ideas by Chinese intellectuals from the May Fourth period at the beginning of the twentieth century till the 1980s. If earlier generations of Chinese intellectuals called for science and democracy and studied Greek and Roman classics to understand the foundation of Western culture, then, scholars like Liu Xiaofeng and Gan Yang are now advocating a way of reading Western classics with a very different agenda, "a strategy of appropriation and alteration rather than an effort to understand them in their original cultural context."[37] Such a change of attitude and purpose has a great deal to do with the major changes I mentioned earlier that started to take place after 1989—the disintegration of intellectual vision, the rise of nationalism, and the emergence of scholars who advocate a kind of national ideology in derision of liberal democracy, an ideology that becomes popular with a fairly large following, while at the same time sending out signals of an intellectual program that the state may find serviceable. This is a new way to read Greek and Roman classics in China at a time when China is gaining in economic and political power with increasingly greater influence in international affairs, when traditional culture, particularly Confucianism, is being revived to boost a sense of national pride under the dubious name of *guo xue* 國學 or "national learning," and when the relationships between scholarship and politics become somewhat tangled and complicated, with some scholars eager to offer ideas that might be useful in legitimizing the power to be with "unique" Chinese characteristics.

Gan Yang, for example, proposed the idea that reading classics is a way to strengthen the "cultural subjectivity" of the Chinese in his argument about the Chinese cultural tradition, which, he claims, runs all the way from Confucianism to Maoism and Deng Xiaoping's thought as a consistent legacy that lays the foundation for such a Chinese "cultural subjectivity."[38] Liu Xiaofeng has called Mao Zedong *guo fu* 國父 or "Father of the Nation," the true great leader who made China strong and self-sufficient, with military and political strength much more effective than Chiang Kai-shek or Sun Yat-sen, who did not have real control of the country in their weak Republican political system. Liu's worship of a strong leader shows the influence of Carl Schmitt and his political theology. Schmitt's political theory, Liu explains, needs to be understood in its historical background, that is, "the position of a weak country Germany fell into after the First World War," and it was in that context, Liu continues, "Schmitt followed Thomas Hobbes and believed that only a state that is capable of making strong decisions can declare war, and the evidence whether a state is strong lies in its ability to determine who is the enemy and who is friend, while retaining the tension between the two."[39] Liu Xiaofeng's effort to introduce Schmitt to Chinese readers today seems to answer a similar need at a time when China is changing from a weak country to a powerful state. The obsession with power naturally leads to the worship of a strong leader, as Schmitt once did in the person of Adolf

[37]Shadi Bartsch, "The Ancient Greeks in Modern China: History and Metamorphosis," unpublished manuscript, p. 11.

[38]See Gan Yang 甘陽, *Tong san tong* 通三統 [*Unifying the Three Legacies*] (Beijing: Sanlian, 2007).

[39]Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓 (Ed.), *Shimite yu zhengzhi faxue* 施米特與政治法學 [*Carl Schmitt and Political Law*] (Shanghai: Shanghsi sanlian, 2002), p. 31.

Hitler as the Fürer. "The leader, as an almost mystical embodiment of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, expressed the popular will," as Jan-Werner Müller remarks. "Thus Schmitt could claim that 'law is the plan and the will of the leader.'"[40] These words seem to have an uncanny relevance to the Chinese situation past and present, and therefore are worthy of our reflection. The ideas proposed by Liu Xiaofeng and Gan Yang should also be understood in the social and historical context in China today, but it is important to know that their ideas are controversial, and not at all representative of contemporary Chinese thinking as a whole. A diversity of thinking and multiplicity of positions may be more descriptive of the intellectual scene in China today, but controversies have made Liu and Gan well-known in China, and their promotion of classical studies as part of a general education program embodies their cherished idea of "leading the leader."[41] The emphasis on power and the aspiration to become intellectual leaders manifest themselves in the way Liu and Gan speak, in their particular style, for they typically write in such a way as though they command some kind of authority, speak largely *ex cathedra*, in an aggressive, self-assertive manner, while dismissive of others and their different views.

Bartsch identifies three approaches Liu and Gan adopt in their use of Western classics: the first concerns the very purpose of their endeavor, namely, "using the Western classics to criticize the West itself"; the second takes advantage of contemporary Western theoretical trends, particularly the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment and rationality, that is, "to link ancient philosophy and the Enlightenment as both fatally flawed by the emphasis on rationality," which is negatively understood as "*instrumental* rationality"; and the third relates to Leo Strauss as providing a methodology of reading that emphasizes the hidden, "esoteric" messages beyond the literal sense of the text.[42] Putting these together, one may get the picture that this is a way of reading that has a particular purpose, a definite ideology, and a methodology that allows an "esoteric" reading to accommodate the use of the classics for an illiberal interpretation. The emphasis on "esoteric" messages, supposedly hidden in the text and to be revealed only by a small group of elite interpreters, makes it possible for the Straussian interpreter to claim certain mystical insights and to offer allegorical interpretations beyond what the text literally says. "Like Strauss," as Bartsch observes, "the Chinese Straussians look especially to 'hints' in the text given by the characters in the dialogue and find Plato's meaning here rather than in what Socrates himself says."[43] That kind of allegorical interpretation works, as I have argued elsewhere, as a "displacement" of the text "by a moral or political commentary."[44] Of course, reading and interpretation always put a layer of commentary onto the literal sense

[40]Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 38.

[41]That has often been a dream of those scholars who want very much to involve in politics and offer advice to state leaders in the capacity of what in Chinese is called *dishi* 帝師 or "the emperor's teacher." Schmitt had that dream for Nazi Germany, but eventually, as Müller comments, "'leading the leader', as Schmitt had imagined he could, turned out to be an intellectual's hubris." Ibid., p. 39.

[42]Bartsch, "The Ancient Greeks in Modern China," pp. 13, 15.

[43]Ibid., p. 16.

[44]Zhang Longxi, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 163.

of the text, so in that sense, all interpretations move beyond the text to a certain degree, but there is a crucial difference between interpretation of the meaning of a text in respect of textual integrity and the displacement of the text by a strongly ideological interpretation.

IV. The Classical and the Limitations of Reception Theory

Reception theory privileges the present and the modern over the past and the ancient. "The text is 'refashioned' in the act of reception, which is therefore an act of representation," as Duncan Kennedy observes. "It is but a short step from here to allegorical interpretation (allegoresis). Allegory ('speaking otherwise') explicitly acknowledges the distance between writer's text and reader's text: the enduring value or interest of the writer's text is endorsed, but not its comprehensibility, and it is reconfigured to speak in the reader's terms."[45] That is to say, allegorical interpretation turns the text, particularly a classic text, into a "reader's text," i.e., a text understood from the reader's perspective at the present over "whatever the case in Archaic Lesbos" or ancient China might be. The privilege of the reader's perspective is predicated on the distance or gap between the past and the present, but the classical, as Gadamer argues, overcomes the very idea of historical distance. The classical implies a continuous historical mediation between the past and the present. "*Understanding*," says Gadamer, "*is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition*, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated."[46] In Batstone's summary, the starting point of reception theory is the idea that "All meaning is constituted or actualized at the point of reception"; but from there it moves towards the extreme position that the classical is what the reader makes it to be: "Virgil can only be what readers have made of him."[47] Paul Valéry has said something very similar, which serves as an endorsement of Jauss's concept of reception and his emphasis on the constructedness of meaning. Valéry's remark−that an object of art is completed by the viewer in an aesthetic experience−"frees aesthetic reception from its contemplative passivity by making the viewer share in the constitution of the aesthetic object," says Jauss; "poiesis now means a process whereby the recipient becomes a participant creator of the work. This is also the simple meaning of the provocative, hermeneutically unjustifiably controversial phrase: '*mes vers ont le sens qu'on leur prête*' (my poetry has the meaning one gives it, Pleiade, I, 1509)."[48] Here we see a strong tendency towards allegorical interpretation which makes the classic text mean what the reader or interpreter would have it to mean, beyond whatever the text literally says. Thus Virgil's *Aeneid* can be read as an epic justifying the power of the Roman *imperium*, in total neglect of the tragic pathos in the text that comes from the conflict between the personal and the impersonal, the sacrifice of love and the founding of an empire: what Adam Perry once called the continual opposition of

[45]Duncan F. Kennedy, "Afterword: *The Uses of 'Reception,'*" in Martindale and Thomas (eds.), *Classics and the Uses of Reception*, p. 289.
[46]Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 290; emphasis in the original
[47]Batstone, "Provocation: *The Point of Reception Theory*," ibid., pp. 14, 19.
[48]Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 56.

two voices, the voice of "the forces of history" and that of "human suffering."[49] Likewise Plato's *Symposium*, despite its obvious level of meaning as a discourse on love, can be understood in a Straussian allegorical reading as essentially about politics, giving expression to Plato's anti-democratic ideas. Reception theory may indeed free the reader from the passivity and positivistic notions of objectivity and truth, but an over-emphasis on the reader's role at the expense of everything else creates a set of problems the reception theorist is unwilling or unable to solve.

Although the theory of reception draws on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer holds very different views from Jauss when it comes to the assessment of the reader's role and the degree to which the reader participates in the construction of meaning. Gadamer acknowledges that Valéry thought of a work of art as incomplete, only to be completed by the viewer or the reader, but Gadamer criticizes him for not working out the consequences of his ideas. "If it is true that a work of art is not, in itself, completable, what is the criterion for appropriate reception and understanding?"[50] Gadamer fully acknowledges the reader's experience of a work of art as participation, but he does not give up the normative function of the classical when he says: "the most important thing about the concept of the classical (and this is wholly true of both the ancient and the modern use of the word) is the normative sense."[51] Valéry indeed frees interpretation from the normative sense of the classical, but from this, "it follows that it must be left to the recipient to make something of the work. One way of understanding the work, then, is no less legitimate than another. There is no criterion of appropriate reaction."[52] As Gadamer sees it, such a sense of freedom is completely false, because it misrepresents how the historical mediation works in the reception of the classical. Valéry's claim that his poetry means whatever the reader understands it to mean is therefore misconceived and irresponsible, and Gadamer calls it "an untenable hermeneutic nihilism."[53] Gadamer's concept of the classical stands as exemplary of the type of texts which contain the basic values we always hold in respect and try to learn from, not some kind of narcissistic mirror to reflect our own subjectivity.

As I mentioned earlier, Gadamer's concept of the timeless classical stands squarely in a long tradition in biblical hermeneutics from St. Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and to Martin Luther. In his book, *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine argues that Scripture offers plain words to satisfy those who are hungry for clear understanding; but to those who disdain plainness and seek rhetorical adornment and complexity, the obscure and figurative part of the Bible gives pleasure. "Thus the Holy Spirit has magnificently and wholesomely modulated the Holy Scriptures so that the more open places present themselves to hunger and the more obscure places may deter a disdainful attitude," says Augustine. "Hardly anything may be found in these obscure places which is not found plainly said elsewhere."[54] The last sentence lays the foundation of a

[49]Adam Perry, "The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*," in Harold Bloom (Ed.), *Modern Critical Interpretations: Virgil's Aeneid* (New York: Chelsea, 1987), p. 72.
[50]Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 94.
[51]Ibid., p. 288.
[52]Ibid., p. 94.
[53]Ibid., p. 95.
[54]St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1958), II.vi.8, p. 38.

hermeneutic principle that puts the plain sense of the scriptural text as the legitimate ground for any understanding and interpretation. This is exactly what Thomas Aquinas argues in an important passage of the *Summa theologica*, in which he insists that "all the senses are founded on one—the literal—from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended allegorically, as Augustine says." He cites Augustine to support his view and continues, "…nothing of Holy Scripture perishes because of this, since nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward clearly by the Scripture in its literal sense."[55] Several hundred years later, Luther, Calvin, and the other reformers found this line of argument helpful in their anti-Catholic polemics, so they followed Aquinas in seeing the Bible as self-explanatory and arguing that Christians need not go through the Catholic Church for adequate understanding of the Scripture. As Karlfried Froehlich observes, there are three aspects in Lutheran hermeneutics which inherit late medieval, and specifically Thomist, presuppositions, namely, the interest in the literal sense, in the clarity of Scripture, and in historical continuity of the exegetical tradition. "Holy Scripture," in Luther's classic formulation, "is its own interpreter (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*)".[56]

For Luther, as for Augustine and Aquinas as influential Christian theologians, the literal sense is not opposed to the spiritual meaning; it is "not so much a *sensus litteralis* as the *sensus spiritualis*," as Gerald Bruns remarks. "It is rather the spirit or fore-understanding in which the text is to be studied."[57] So in Lutheran hermeneutics, the literal sense is not opposed to the spiritual meaning, and thus not truly or unconditionally literal; it is, rather, the *sensus litteralis theologicus*. Thus the literal sense of Scripture, as Froehlich remarks, is quite different from "mere words, a purely grammatical sense, the dead letter."[58] In this exegetical tradition from Augustine and Aquinas to Luther, however, the literal sense is absolutely essential, as it forms the only legitimate ground for any interpretation and serves as the guard against far-fetched allegorization, against distorting misreading and misinterpretations. When Gadamer insists on the normative sense of the classical, he transfers this hermeneutic principle from biblical exegesis to the reading of secular, classical texts without necessarily religious implications.

In modern criticism, Umberto Eco is one of the earliest to argue for the openness of the text, and the role of the reader.[59] Perhaps in reaction against the American theories of reader-response criticism, particularly as proposed by Stanley Fish, which make the reader the sole creator of text and meaning, Eco poses the question of the limits of interpretation, and further, the problem of what

[55]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.1.10, in Anton Pagis (Ed.), *Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1945), 1:17.
[56]Karlfried Froehlich, "Problems of Lutheran Hermeneutics," in John Reumann, with Samuel H. Nafzger and Harold H. Ditmanson (Eds.), *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 134.
[57]Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 142.
[58]Froehlich, "Problems of Lutheran Hermeneutics," p. 133.
[59]See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

he calls excessive and untenable "overinterpretation."[60] In postmodern criticism, the author is famously and ironically pronounced dead by the French author Roland Barthes, even though the irony has escaped many of his readers and followers. The text thus becomes a space for the uncontrollable free play of signifiers, as well as the intertextual multiplicity of different quotations and diverse voices. Yet, all these signifiers engaged in a free play still need a place to coalesce for the text to make sense, even if momentarily. "There is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader," Barthes declares. "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost."[61] If the author is dead and the intention of the author (*intentio auctoris*) is often irrelevant anyway, Eco proposes an interesting notion of the intention of the text (*intentio operis*) to balance out the wayward intention of the reader (*intentio lectoris*). Eco's "intention of the text" is actually the basic assumption of textual coherence or textual integrity, a conjecture on the part of the reader guided by the semiotic structure of the text as a whole. "How to prove a conjecture about the *intentio operis*?" asks Eco, and he gives the following answer: "The only way is to check it upon the text as a coherent whole. This idea," he goes on to add, "is an old one and comes from Augustine (*De doctrina christiana*): any interpretation given of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed by, and must be rejected if it is challenged by, another portion of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader."[62] Here in Eco's concept of the intention of the text we recognize the same tradition in biblical hermeneutics that Gadamer has also adopted in his concept of the classical, namely, the exegetical tradition from Augustine to Aquinas and Luther, secularized in modern criticism, which puts the textual coherence and integrity as the basis of all readings and interpretations.

Eco's emphasis on textual coherence and Gadamer's on the normative sense of the classical can all be understood as an effort to acknowledge the actual practice of reading; which in reality is not and cannot be totally free and arbitrary, without restrictions set up by the whole structure of the text with words and phrases which internally correlate with one another. This correlation forms the hermeneutic circle within which meaning is generated in the movement from parts to the whole, and from the whole to the parts. Understanding, Batstone argues, is always self-understanding, and such an argument tends to justify the use of the classics, as understanding seems always to move in a hermeneutic circle. Of course, we all have our particular horizons from which we begin to understand things, so we start with our preconceived notions or what Heidegger calls the fore-structure of understanding. Before we understand anything, we already have some idea about that which we are to understand; that is, our anticipations or prejudgments, and the process of understanding appears to move

[60] See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980); Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); and Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose, *Interpretation and overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[61] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 148.

[62] Eco, *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, p. 65.

in circularity. The point of the hermeneutic circle, however, is not to confirm the circularity of understanding or the subjectivity of our own horizon, for "the point of Heidegger's hermeneutical reflection is not so much to prove that there is a circle as to show that this circle possesses an ontologically positive significance," as Gadamer explains in an important passage of *Truth and Method*. "All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought, and it must direct its gaze 'on the things themselves.' "[63] It becomes clear that even though Jauss's reception theory derives a lot from Gadamer's hermeneutics, their difference is nonetheless important, and the degree of the reader's participation in the aesthetic experience, though fully acknowledged in Gadamerian hermeneutics, cannot exceed the proper proportion in the "fusion of horizons." Whatever context we may put the classic into for innovative interpretation, the classical text has its own horizon or, as Eco puts it, its own intention, which has always to be taken into consideration for adequate understanding.

[63]Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 266-67.