

TRIBUTE TO JAROSLAV PRŮŠEK (1906–1980)**UNPACKING PRŮŠEK'S CONCEPTION
OF THE "LYRICAL": A TRIBUTE
AND SOME INTERCULTURAL REFLECTIONS¹**

LEO OU-FAN LEE

ABSTRACT

The essay was written in commemoration of Jaroslav Průšek (1906–1980) by his former student Leo Ou-fan Lee. The author offers a rereading of Průšek's groundbreaking research on modern Chinese literature assessing his theoretical insights which have made profound impact on the discipline and have remained a constant source of inspiration for Chinese literature studies. It discusses the implications of Průšek's two famous papers – one on individualism and subjectivism, the other on a "confrontation" between traditional Chinese literature and modern European literature – and re-examines their relevance to the study of modern Chinese literature today as cultural history.

Keywords: Jaroslav Průšek; Chinese literature; modernity; individualism and subjectivism; lyricism; methodology of literary studies

On this occasion of the 110th anniversary of Professor Jaroslav Průšek's birth, I have come to Prague to pay tribute to his lasting scholarly impact. With the passing of C. T. Hsia, we are also bemoaning the loss of two scholarly giants who separately (one in Europe and one in the US) and jointly (via their debate) established the field of modern Chinese literature in the West. While Hsia's legacy has received major attention in all parts of the world, it is perhaps fitting to remind ourselves that Průšek's work has also inspired a great number of scholars, myself included.

This belated tribute essay focuses on two seminal papers by Professor Průšek: "Subjectivism and Individualism in Modern Chinese Literature" (1957; hereafter abbreviated as "Subjectivism"); and "A Confrontation of Traditional Oriental Literature with Modern European Literature in the Context of the Chinese Literary Revolution" (1964; hereafter abbreviated as "Confrontation"). Both articles are included in a collection of Průšek's papers edited by myself under the title of *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature* (Průšek 1980). I consider them to be the crux of Průšek's conception of modern Chinese literature that deserves repeated reading and further elaboration.

¹ A preliminary version of this paper was presented during the Symposium Commemorating the 110th Anniversary of the Birth of Jaroslav Průšek organized by the International Sinological Center at Charles University in Prague on June 3, 2016.

The very fact that David Wang, who has enjoyed a long and close relationship with C. T. Hsia, has found in Průšek's concept of the lyrical a model for his new and path-breaking work, *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis* (Wang 2015) is an illustrious example of the sustained impact of Průšek's ideas. The two terms "lyrical" and "epic" in the book's title are obviously Průšek's, but Wang uses them in a most subtle way as a yardstick to describe not only a large corpus of modern Chinese literary texts but also the fate of their authors at the crucial watershed event, the triumph of the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949. Wang extends Průšek's argument by asking the critical question: what is the meaning of Chinese "lyricism" in a new "epic time" of revolution and what choices confronted a whole generation of Chinese writers and artists.

Another young colleague from Hong Kong, Leonard Chan, who has been working on the topic of Chinese lyrical tradition for a long time, has collaborated with Wang in editing a compendium in Chinese: *Shuqing zhi xiandaixing: shuqing chuantong lunshu yu Zhongguo wenxue yanjiu* 抒情之現代性: 抒情傳統論述與中國文學研究 (The Modernity of Lyricism: Essays on Chinese Lyrical Tradition; Chan and Wang 2014), that includes a translation of Průšek's "Subjectivism" article, which is preceded by a long introductory guide written by Chan. Chan has also written several articles on the work of Průšek as a Sinologist, including one on his conception of the lyrical. My debt to these two scholars is obvious. In some ways the present essay can serve as a supplement to their work.

Literary history vs. literary criticism

Průšek and Hsia epitomize totally different sensibilities and scholarly approaches. Hsia's magnificent book, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (Hsia 1961), is in substance an original work of literary criticism, not strictly speaking a literary history. It contains chapters of brilliant textual readings on the representative works by individual authors linked together by other narrative chapters of political-intellectual-cultural trends. On the other hand, Průšek seldom enters into close textual criticism *per se* – that is, to subject the individual text to rigorous close reading and analysis by using standards drawn from New Criticism as Hsia does. For Průšek, a literary text does not exist by itself, but is always part of a larger context, which it illuminates. He is always aware of the dynamics between literary texts and historical background, particularly that of revolution. His Marxist convictions are inevitably expressed by his commitment to the Chinese Communist Revolution, of which the May Fourth movement formed the intellectual and cultural spearhead. I would venture further to say that in fact Průšek has woven his Marxist beliefs into a complex methodology of literary history that blends literary texts with historical dynamics, and literary form with cultural content. This is the thread I would like to trace, to the best of my knowledge.

As a multilingual scholar, Průšek chooses to write in English, a language in which he does not feel entirely at home. One wonders how he would discuss the same subject in Czech, French, or German? I would like to characterize his English style as somewhat

long-winded, though fluent and elegant in its own way. He tends to use fairly long sentences, which impart a formal academic air, in order to build up his arguments and paint larger frescoes. (This is in sharp contrast to C. T. Hsia's brilliantly concise English.) Above all he employs big concepts like "subjectivism" and "individualism" to characterize a very complex range of literary features which he then proceeds to unpack, but sometimes the issues involved are so complex as to exceed the examples he has chosen to illustrate. Thus, as one of his students and editor of his last volume of scholarly papers I feel it is my duty to continue this task. To do so I must attempt to do a thorough re-reading of the two essays listed above and, wherever appropriate, to make a few comments.

Subjectivism and Lyricism

"Subjectivism and Individualism in Modern Chinese Literature" is perhaps the most quoted work by Průšek, according to his student Marian Gálik (Gálik 1998: 184). With 28 pages in print it is also one of the longest. Průšek declares at the beginning that he wishes to follow "a single complex of features which can be summed up under 'subjectivism and individualism'" (Průšek 1980: 1). His initial definition is as follows: "I understand these terms to cover an emphasis on the creator's personality in art and a concentration of attention on the artist's own life" (*ibid.*). He considers it a feature of modern Chinese literature, because "it is natural that the birth of a modern, free, and self-determining individual was possible only at the price of shattering and discarding these traditional views and customs and the whole social structure on which they were based" (*ibid.*: 2). At first glance, this statement looks like a specimen of standard May Fourth intellectual discourse, but he wishes to apply it to literature and art as well. Průšek then adds a few qualifications: such tendencies when "joined with pessimism and a feeling for the tragedy of life, along with an inclination to revolt and even the tendency to self-destruction, are the most characteristic qualities of Chinese literature from the May Fourth Movement of 1919 to the outbreak of war with Japan" (*ibid.*: 3). This is, to say the least, an all-encompassing generalisation. It brings up a further complication: how can an outlook of life and intellectual value be turned into a literary and artistic mode and stance? Content and form are interrelated, of course, but they are not the same thing. As we read on, a third term is introduced, "lyrical" or "lyricism", which becomes all but interchangeable with "subjectivism" and is contrasted with opposing pair of terms – the "epic" and the "objective", such as the following statement: "We should most certainly find it in the greater emphasis on the lyrical and subjective aspects of literary production as compared with the predominantly epic and objective character of folk literature" (*ibid.*: 9). Here Průšek is referring to classical Chinese literature in which "the lyric occupies the foremost place" (*ibid.*). The crucial issue then becomes: how do the two strains interact with each other not only in traditional Chinese literature but in modern Chinese literature as well, which has inherited both the lyrical and epic legacies? The problematic can be turned into a specific question: if the lyrical tendency is a predominant feature of classical Chinese literature, how can it be transposed to modern Chinese literature, especially since "ground-plan" of May Fourth writers is of the novella and short story which "have their epic origins" and "poetry and literary essay are no longer privileged as in the past" (*ibid.*:

26). Průšek is not unaware of the problem, for he proceeds to delineate this transformation in the rest of the essay by primarily concentrating on some of the prominent literary works produced in the Qing period, in which he detects a certain “loosening of the bonds which the feudal order imposed on the individual” (*ibid.*: 28). Leonard Chan considers this last point “debatable”; it can only be regarded as “a general truth in various phases of literary history”, for “there is always a desire for any conscientious writer to quest for freedom against restrictions and confines of any kind” (Chan 2008: 26). I would argue that the issue is also connected with literary genre: since Průšek finds the lyric in the predominant genres of poetry (*shi* 詩), song (*ci* 詞) and rhymed prose (*fu* 賦), he seems to demote the epic form of the popular novel to a lower place of folk literature. How would this implied hierarchy be redressed to reflect the modern tide of emancipation and revolution, which obviously calls for the “epic” forms? Průšek tries to resolve this seeming dilemma in two steps: first, by arguing that some of the subjective elements have sneaked into the traditional tales and short stories, especially in the Ming *huaben* (hence echoing a similar point made by C. T. Hsia in his other book, *The Classic Chinese Novel*); and secondly, by reinforcing the same procedure in some modern novels of epic proportions such as Mao Dun’s 茅盾 *Midnight* (Ziye 子夜). In other words, he tries to inject a positive and transforming energy into his concept of the lyrical. Still, in my view, the “epic” side seems to have fallen short, but Průšek’s “ground-plan” has become a springing board for David Wang’s monumental book, *The Lyrical in Epic Time*. With copious examples drawn from a variety of twentieth-century Chinese writers and artists, he has demonstrated that the “lyrical” (*shuqing* 抒情) has indeed become a more active trope in “epic time”—that is, in the new epoch of 20th-century China which is dominated by collective “history”.

The Lyrical in Traditional Literature

Let us return to Průšek’s initial inquiry as evolved in the “Subjectivism” essay. As mentioned earlier, in his view “the lyrical and subjective aspects of literary production” in traditional Chinese literature belonged to the literary elite whereas “epic in the form of narrative poems, tales and novels scarcely appears in the work of the literati at all” (Průšek 1980: 10). This last statement is, however, subject to debate, since it begs the question: who wrote the epic forms of literature? Some scholars have argued that there are narrative poems of epic scope written by the literary elite and that some historical narratives (such as Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 *Shiji* 史記) and historical romances do contain sufficient epic elements. Průšek was certainly aware of this, but his interest lay elsewhere: not the long novels of the 16th century such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Outlaws of the March*, or *The Journey to the West*, but more recent works of prose produced in the 18th and 19th centuries. Is it because in such works the elite-lyrical and the folk-epic strains were already mixed, thus serving as formal proof that a “loosening of the bonds” had already taken place – or more likely to be expected? In works of the late Qing period, he makes only brief comments on the “strongly personal tendency” in the late Qing works such as *The Travels of Lao Can* (Lao Can youji 老殘遊記) and *Strange Things Seen during Twenty Years* (Ershinain mudu zhi guaixianzhuang 二十年目睹之怪現狀) and *Exposes of Officialdom* (Guanchang xianxingji 官場現形記; or *A Picture of the Pres-*

ent-day Class of Officials in Průšek's translation). But he reserves his highest compliment to the famous collection of ghostly *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Liaozhai zhiyi 聊齋誌異) by Pu Songling, an early 18th-century writer and frustrated intellectual. He praises Pu Songling as a writer of "the perfect short-story" who was ahead of his time. He considers the "author's preface" as a text of "intense lyricism and pathos" (Průšek 1980: 13). Yet in this article he does not treat the fox-fairy stories in this famous collection at all, but chooses instead to mention Pu's poetic works. One is left with the impression that Průšek prefers non-fictional prose works, particularly the more intimate genres, over the multi-chapter long novels.

In fact, the middle part of this long article is devoted entirely to a lengthy discussion of classical prose works of a personal nature, as included in a collection called *Selection of Diary Literature* (Riji wenxue congxuan 日記文學叢選) edited by Ruan Wuming 阮無名. This seeming digression is intended to gather enough evidence to show the general tendency toward subjectivism in classical Chinese prose. Here Průšek does not distinguish prose and fiction at all because he is interested only in the "penetration of subjective elements into literature in various descriptions of nature, where ... the tableau or lyrical picture, striving to evoke the impression of pure and perfect beauty, was always set off by some intimate experience, reminiscence or anecdote" (Průšek 1980: 24). Like Lin Yutang 林語堂 and others, he has a special soft-spot for Shen Fu's 沈復 autobiographical account *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* (Fusheng liuji 浮生六記). Expectedly Průšek lavishes high praise on the author's ability to bring diverse personal materials and intimate experiences into a unified conception so that the whole work becomes "a uniform, one-piece tragedy of human life" (Průšek 1980: 26) – not knowing that at least two of its six chapters proved to be forgeries, which are sandwiched between the more intimate chapters about his beloved wife Yun Niang 芸娘 who dies prematurely of sickness. Whether Průšek was aware of it or not, his central argument about the lyrical nature of this rather unique work remains undamaged. But when he turns to another late Qing work, a "novel" in the form of a travelogue, *The Travels of Lao Can*, his views seem to tilt toward a socio-political, rather than lyrical-subjective, interpretation.

Průšek criticizes the work's traditional structure of chapter breaks and dismisses the most lyrical middle chapters (Chapter 8–10), which in my view evokes a lyrical and allegorical landscape of the protagonist's inner aesthetic world. Průšek faults the entire episode as "medieval wild fantasy... the result of purely artificial architectonics, dictated by aesthetic principles and not by the needs of the story" ("Introduction to Studies in Modern Chinese Literature", in Průšek 1980: 45). If so, don't "aesthetic principles" carry any lyrical weight at all? He has obviously adopted an ideological interpretation of the middle chapters as reactionary and anti-revolutionary (i.e. against Sun Yat-sen's revolution). Nor does he pay sufficient attention to the characterization of the protagonist, Lao Can except to say that he is a projection of the author, Liu E 劉鶚. Yet the hero's problematic position in the whole fictional landscape also deserves attention. I have argued elsewhere that Lao Can is portrayed as an "in-between" figure who is both an inactive traditional scholar-official and a precursor of the self-alienated (from political service) modern intellectual (Lee 1985).² On the other hand, another late Qing novel produced

² My article was itself inspired by Průšek's idea of lyricism, as Gálik has correctly pointed out.

at the same time (1906), *A short history of civilization* (Wenming xiaoshi 文明小史) by Li Boyuan 李伯元 (Li Baojia 李寶嘉) who also penned *Expose of Officialdom* (Guanchang xianxingji 官場現形記), has all the formal characteristics of a modern “epic” in its objective portrait of Chinese society in a crucial decade (1900–1910) which witnessed the trials of the “New Policies” movement (*xinzheng* 新政) initiated by the Qing regime and the immense waves of social and political ferment before the Republican Revolution. Thus in the same year we find both lyrical and epic works of fiction (*xiaoshuo* 小說). Of course, Průšek’s studies of late Qing fiction are not confined to this one article, but can also be found elsewhere, such as “The Changing Role of the Narrator in Chinese Novels at the Beginning of the Twentieth-Century”, in which he deals perceptively with a number of late Qing novels, including *Flowers of Retribution* (Niehai hua 孽海花), which can be regarded as a prime example of historical romance and a variant form of the epic. At Harvard, he gave a seminar devoted entirely to a close reading of this work. He may have used this seminar as preparatory ground for a new research project on the “epic” varieties of the late Qing novel, including historical romances. If so, his scholarly plans were sadly cut short. After he returned to his homeland, the political situation changed radically, which made it impossible for him to engage in normal scholarly activities.³

Half a century after the event, I now realize how deeply Průšek’s legacy has been imbedded in my own work. I started as a young student from a totally different cultural and ideological background. As one of his “guest pupils” (since he was a visiting guest at Harvard), I intentionally challenged his positions, but he always welcomed it with gracious tolerance (see Lee 2006). Only five graduate students took his seminar, who all bore the imprint of his ideas in their subsequent work.⁴ My own interest in late Qing literature was the direct product of that seminar. Following Průšek, I wish to relate the forms and subgenres of the late Qing novel to the unprecedented socio-political changes of the period. Moreover, to rephrase David Wang’s term of “repressed modernity”, I wish to ask anew about the formal features of the late Qing novels and how beneath their seemingly traditional structure there may have lurked new elements (though repressed) which eventually led to the modern literature of the May Fourth period. Like Wang, I tend to seek continuity rather than rupture from the late Qing to May Fourth. Thus my small disagreements should be taken as a kind of “anxiety of influence” under the mantle of a great master.

Renegotiating theory: the Czech connection

One striking feature of Průšek’s essays is that although as a Sinologist he is deeply steeped in Chinese literary and aesthetic tradition, his formulation of concepts seems to be underpinned by certain theoretical thinking from European sources. The most

³ Marian Gálík mentions that when in August 1968 the Soviet army invaded Czechoslovakia, it forced the cancellation of the conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies in Prague devoted to 50th anniversary of the May Fourth movement at which nearly 500 Sinologists would like to participate (Gálík 1998: 159).

⁴ Gálík has listed several in his article. I recall only Don Price, Janet Walker, Sue Fawn Chung, and a graduate student from Hong Kong who was doing a dissertation on *Niehai hua*.

relevant are, of course, the Prague School and Russian Formalism. Yet theory is never foregrounded in his essays, nor rigorously applied. Thus it is impossible to trace the exact sources of origin. The following is merely a preliminary inquiry.

I had no clue of Průšek's theoretical background when I took his two courses at Harvard: in his general lecture course, he did mention the Prague School but did not go into any detail (the lecture course was geared toward undergraduates). Recent research by Leonard Chan has now convinced me that indeed Průšek had close connections with the Prague Linguistic Circle: "Most of his working concepts, such as artistic structure, composition, social and aesthetic functions, can be easily traced back to the theory of Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975) and Felix Vodička (1909–1974), two colleagues of Průšek's at the Charles University" (Chan 2008).⁵

But Chan did not go into any detail. Lacking any expertise on the Prague School myself, I can only surmise that Průšek may have been influenced by Mukařovský's views on the aesthetic function of language in a work of literary art, be it prose or poetry. The aesthetic structure of a work of art, according to the general principles of the Prague School, has its own intrinsic value and autonomy. Accordingly, its theories of form – be it poetry or prose – must also be based on actual texts. This impression comes from my limited exposure to one of its luminary practitioners, Professor Lubomír Doležel, author of *Major Modes of Czech Fiction* and many other theoretical articles, at a scholarly conference on the modern Chinese short story in Honolulu. I recall that Doležel, together with his then wife, Professor Milena Doleželová, impressed upon me the rule that any literary analysis must stem from the texts themselves and not from the author's background or the historical circumstances of their production (as cultural or literary historians like myself tend to do). I can now openly acknowledge their great impact on my thinking. Still, this does not seem to solve the issue of historical context, especially in view of Průšek's great sympathies with the Chinese Revolution, to which the New Literature contributed a large share. How do we reconcile the formalism of Průšek's method with his historicism? The clue may be found at least in part in his own background of Czech literature.

I suspect that there may be a hidden parallel between Průšek's sympathies to modern Chinese writers and his devotion to modern Czech writers. The few times when he mentioned the name of Mukařovský in class, he invariably invoked a few names of Czech writers, particularly Karel Čapek (1890–1938). This led me to believe that theory and creative writing are closely related in Průšek's mind. He did not specifically mention Vodička, another member of the Prague School who may have been a closer colleague of his at Charles University. Vodička was the author of *Paths and Goals of National Revival Literature* (*Cesty a cíle obrozenské literatury*),⁶ which Průšek may have read. I have not read this book, but believe that it must have contained chapters on the two major modern Czech writers, Čapek and his fellow writer Jaroslav Hašek (1883–1923). Čapek's translations of French poetry further inspired a new generation of Czech poets.⁷ Leonard Chan

⁵ Gálík also mentioned F. Vodička in his memorial article, a fact confirmed by Dr. Dušan Andrš of Charles University as this Symposium.

⁶ I am deeply indebted to Dr. Dušan Andrš who introduced this book to me at the Symposium.

⁷ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. The entry cites the biography of Čapek by Ivan Klíma, a famous contemporary Czech writer.

is the only scholar who has noted this possible connection. In his introduction to the chapter “Distant Voices” in the volume, *The Modernity of Lyricism* (Chan 2014), Chan states succinctly that Průšek’s studies of Chinese literature are informed by two Czech legacies: the structuralist method of the Prague School and the Bohemian romantic spirit of the National Revival movement since the end of the 18th century: from the romanticism of Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1836) to the avant-garde experiment of “Czech Poetism” of the 1920s and 1930s, which “nurtured an emancipatory power”. Accordingly, Průšek may have seen a Chinese resonance in the gurgling current of ‘lyrical spirit’ in the long river of Chinese literature” (Chan and Wang 2014: 309). This is a most valuable finding. In the same vein, we can argue that Hašek’s parodistic novel, *Good Soldier Schweik*, is a parallel text to Lu Xun’s “The True Story of Ah Q”. I would make a further conjecture that the lyrical strain must have been the primary strain in the Czech literary tradition which has freely entered Czech poetry and prose as an active agent.

Another issue is related to Průšek’s theoretical knowledge of Marxism. I recall that when I first met Průšek as a graduate student I naively saw him as a Communist. Yet never once did he make any statement in support of Chinese Communism. Rather, in private and with his seminar students he deplored the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. Gradually I came to the realization that he was a humanist with refined tastes who “was very fond of life” rather than a Party apparatchik. He was certainly not a “vulgar Marxist”, for never once in class did he cite any Marxist theory of literature, not even Georg Lukács. But he did mention the work of the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, which provides another clue to Průšek’s theoretical background. It seems that for Průšek the two schools were closely connected and that for his studies of Chinese literary history Russian Formalism may be more relevant.

In his paper on “Lu Hsun’s 魯迅 ‘Huai chiu 懷舊’: A Precursor of Modern Chinese Literature”, he remarks on a notable modern feature in this pioneering story written in the classical *wenyan* language: “Lu Hsun’s approach to his plot is one of simplification, a reduction of the plot to simplest components, and an attempt to present his subject without the framework of an explanatory story” (Průšek 1980: 106). He also cites Lu Xun’s story “Shizhong 示眾” as another example, in which “the plot has completely disappeared”. The basis for this remark is Čapek’s “Story without Words”, which represents a new literary experiment for a writer who used to excel also in detective fiction (one might also add that Čapek is also a writer of science fiction, and invented the word “robot”). He then remarks that “by the same time the Soviet literary critic V. Shklovsky devoted a whole chapter of his book, *The Theory of Prose* (Czech translation by B. Mathesius, Prague, 1933) to “literature outside the plot” (*ibid.*: 107). Shklovsky is here dealing with three books by the Russian writer Rozanov.⁸ Here I quote a passage from the chapter in English translation:

“These books are not entirely formless, since we see in them certain constancy in the device used in their formation. For me these books represent a new genre, a genre that

⁸ Průšek used the Czech translation by B. Mathesius, Prague, 1933; note here that the Czech translation is done by the same Mathesius who collaborated with Průšek in translation of Tang poetry. (On their collaboration see Lomová and Zádřapová 2016).

resembles, above all, the parodistic novel, that is, with the weakly expressed framing story (the main plot) and without a comic tinge. Rozanov's work represents a heroic attempt to go beyond the confines of literature, 'to speak without words, without form' and the work has turned out splendidly, because it has given birth to a new literature, a new form" (Shklovsky 1991: 1991).

This is typical Shklovsky, whose theoretical insights stem from his interest in the formal features which are marked by the development of technical "devices". (Chapter I of *Theory of Prose* is titled "Art as Device".) Apparently in Rozanov's works even the "parodistic novel" form is being torn apart by diverse prose materials such as letters, newspaper articles, biographical or autobiographical accounts, even photographs – that fill up Rozanov's fictional canvas. Průšek seizes on this point to bring in Lu Xun's story:

"This to some extent was what Lu Hsün tried to do: he substituted sketches, reminiscences, lyrical descriptions, etc., for the traditional belletristic forms of China and Europe. These tendencies shared by Lu Hsün and that of modern European prose writers could, I believe, be called the penetration of the epic by the lyric and the breaking up of the traditional epic forms" (Průšek 1980: 107).

He then makes a more daring argument that Lu Xun's innovation should not be considered as being inspired by "the peculiar nature of the old Chinese prose in the classical language, where prose without a plot was predominant". Rather, this Chinese writer was "making use of devices that European prose did not discover until much later. Hence the emergence of modern literature "is not a gradual process involving the adaptation of various foreign elements and the gradual change of the traditional structure, but that it is fundamentally a sudden process" (*ibid.*). This bold argument may agree with his conception of revolution, but does not entirely follow the principles of Russian Formalism. Shklovsky also states that literary development in general "progresses along a broken path" with many ruptures, but this path itself has its own trajectory: "No, the real point is that the legacy that is passed on from one literary generation to the next moves not from father to son but from uncle to nephew" (Shklovsky 1991: 189–190). Applied to the transformation of Chinese literary genres, it means that the canonical genres such as classical poetry and prose may not carry the main legacy in literary development; it is the subsidiary genres, often of a more folk or vernacular origin, such as vernacular tale or novel, that performs the task. "New literary forms are emerging out of the lower stratum of society to replace the old ones. The old forms, no more consciously felt than grammatical forms are in speech, have lost their artistic character to assume an official status that precludes sensation" (Shklovsky 1991: 190).

My own sense of Průšek's citation of Shklovsky's theory is that he uses it to privilege modern Chinese literature, and not vice versa. In stressing the "sudden process" of change, he has made it more difficult to deal with the transition from traditional to modern forms. How can the subjective and lyrical tendencies of belletristic forms of prose be transformed into the "epic" forms of revolutionary fiction, especially since the old epic narratives are both structured and driven by plot? Through another sudden process by another modern writer? Here we must again make a digression to his discussion of Mao Dun's fiction.

Literary dynamics between the “lyrical” and the “epic”

Průšek’s analysis of Mao Dun’s works can be found in his long chapter on “Mao Tun and Yu Ta-fu” 郁達夫 taken from a book *Three Sketches of Chinese Literature* (Průšek 1969). It is full of subtlety and insight because he delves into the problem of narration. Unlike most scholars of Mao Dun who focus only on the author’s Marxist ideology as revealed in his work, Průšek chooses first to approach it formalistically by contrasting the roles of the narrator with old Chinese novels – by arguing that his traditional passive role is changed into that of the “modern epic first person” who, though omniscient, is equipped with “a constant shifting viewpoint” (Průšek 1969: 124). Not only that, Mao Dun is also capable of “the subjectivization of the narrative in the sense that it is transmitted through a certain character, is colored by that character’s participation and aspect, passes through the prism of that personality... And so modern narration is broken down into a number of sections and ‘each of these sections has a different subjective coloring’... The linguistic device employed in this kind of subjectivization is ‘mixed speech’... This leads to a ‘constant intermingling of inner monologue with narration’, which implies a constant confrontation of ‘outer’ epic reality with the ‘inner’ spiritual world of the character” (Průšek 1969: 125). This long and elaborate passage with internal citations contains theoretical insights by Lubomír Doležel here quoted by Průšek to bone up his high praise for Mao Dun. (In contrast, C. T. Hsia’s evaluation of the same author is much lower.) At least, it clarifies for us what he means by the phrase “the penetration of the epic by the lyric”.

It seems to me that Průšek quotes Doležel’s theory of mixed speech also to buttress his point about the penetration of the lyrical into Mao Dun’s epic form, for the novel is conceived grandly as a modern Chinese epic (which Mao Dun called a “Romance”). In so doing, Průšek seems to have lost sight of the historical totality of the novel’s design. In other words, the specter of Lukács nevertheless looms large. As David Wang perceptively noted, both Lukács and Průšek “share the yearning to reinstate the epic world, and to that end, both entertain the Romantic motif of the epic world as one of affective plenitude and semantic immanence. In a peculiar way. Průšek could have cited Chinese lyricism, thanks to its lyricic-epic potential, as a remedy whereas its Western counterpart, in Lukács’s opinion, falls short” (Wang 2015: 34). Wang tactfully fills the lacunae in Průšek’s articulation by invoking not only Lukács but Adorno as well:

“Whereas Adorno looks into the agency of negative dialectics in modernistic lyricism, Průšek tries to revitalize the synthetic power of premodern Chinese lyrical poetry. For him, even if Chinese literature proceeds inevitably toward epic revelation, the lyrical ethos arising therefrom does not serve as its estranged other but rather provides cohesive power, endowing Chinese social subjectivity with a synthetic quality of its own. The mutual implication of the lyrical and the epic can exemplify the ‘singular plural socialist vision’” (Wang 2015: 35).

Thus in one grand stroke of theoretical negotiation, Wang has subtly put Průšek’s lyricism in a positive light.

But what about the epic in its modern transformation? Does it offer some new features from the old epic form governed by plot? In his Mao Dun chapter Průšek mentions only

three Western authors in the epic category: Zola, Čapek, and John Dos Passos. Of the three perhaps only the last fully qualifies. In introducing this now neglected American novelist, Průšek adds his own comment: “With Dos Passos, it is the endeavor to overstep the tradition of a unified and oversimplified single-rail plot, and also perhaps the striving to render adequately the polyphony of city life, combined with a desire to create a more complex composition” (Průšek 1980: 142) that made his novel *Manhattan Transfer* a great modern epic. This “polyphony” aspect may be the most important feature of the modern novel from Dostoevsky to Passos, if we can stretch Bakhtin’s theory to some extent. But what about Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, and for that matter, his earlier masterpiece *Ulysses*? Or the great novelists of the Austro-German lineage: Broch, Musil, and Canetti?

Confrontation or Convergences between East and West?

At this point, we must proceed to Průšek’s “Confrontation” essay. It is also a condensed meditation on an issue of the grandest comparative scope. It is much shorter and more succinct than the “Subjectivism” article to which it is related, yet offering us greater insights. Its main thesis is stated near the end:

“The main literary stream in Old China was that of lyric poetry, and this predilection runs through the new literary production as well, so that subjective feeling dominates and often breaks up the epic forms. A similar wave of lyricism flooded European literature, too, after the first World War, and had the same disintegrating influence on the traditional objective forms, as was particularly evident in the break-up of the form of the classical nineteenth-century novel. Taking the place of the strict epic structure is a free grouping of purely lyrical or lyrico-epic elements. In this point, there was a convergence of the old Chinese tradition with contemporary European moods” (Průšek 1980: 84).

I find these passages to be endlessly fascinating. Several of his usual key words recur but here placed in a context of comparison between Chinese and modern European literature. A new key word also emerges: convergence, or its more dynamic twin, confrontation (as in the title of the article). By convergence Průšek does not necessarily mean that one literature influences the other or vice versa, because the word invariably puts the two literatures on an unequal footing (usually in favor of Europe, but not for him; see later page). What he means is something like a literary “affinity” rather than contrast. I would suggest an additional term, counterpoint (from music), which implies that the traditions and currents in China and the West are different and have different trajectories of developments, yet they can “converge” as parallels on a certain historical time-frame – in this case, the interwar period of 1919–1939, which corresponds with the May Fourth period in China.

Beyond making a grand statement, Průšek does not go into much analytic detail in this grand comparison. If his copious remarks about the penetration of lyrical elements into traditional epic forms in China in his other articles have made the picture somewhat clear, apparently he does not feel the need to do the same with the development of Euro-

pean literature: how did the wave of lyricism that flooded European literature managed to exert a “disintegrating influence” on the “strict epic structure” of the classical 19th-century novel? What are the traditional belletristic forms of Europe? What constitutes the “penetration” and the resulting “breaking up”? Průšek’s has left these issues unexplained. After all, as a Sinologist he is not responsible for such an explanation.

Allow me to fill in some small gaps. As David Wang has pointed out, Lukács and Adorno have contrasting views about lyricism, yet both place lyrical poetry at the center of the European crisis: if Lukács “suspects that modern lyricism epitomizes the degeneration of Western civilization,” Adorno worries about its power and legitimacy of survival after the Holocaust. Průšek, on the other hand, glorifies its “break-up” potential against tradition, thus assuming the role of a precursor of modernism. In my Foreword to *The Lyrical and the Epic*, I made some reservations about this claim. Leonard Chan comes to Průšek’s defense by arguing that if we explore the issue in a broader context, “we might put forward the speculation that the modern European avant-garde movement might, to a certain extent, be initiated or at least inspired by the oriental lyrical art and literature” (Chan 2008: 28). Consequently their affinities should not be considered accidental. For evidence Chan has pointed to the Czech translations of classical Chinese poetry by none other than Průšek himself, which deeply influenced modern Czech poetry and theory. Still, this East-West connection needs further contextualization. If I erred before due to my narrow knowledge by tracing a different genealogy of Western modernism (i.e. from Baudelaire to Eliot), thereby leaving out the German and Central European variations, which indeed put great stress on the lyrical, I now stand corrected.

Still, this does not fully resolve the “internal” issues of Průšek’s final argument. In its grand comparative scope, Průšek obviously gives more weight to the power of lyric poetry in Old China than to the wave of modern European avant-garde. Moreover, in Průšek’s articles he obviously has a predilection for prose than poetry. In matters concerning prose literature, Průšek does not wish to distinguish prose from fiction or short stories from long novels. Perhaps Shklovsky also obscures the boundary by an all-inclusive generic view of prose. Thus it does not really matter whether Rozanov’s three books are fiction or prose – just the contrary, their mixed-up quality is what made it new. More importantly, Průšek has given Lu Xun and Yu Dafu the principal role as carriers of the power of lyricism to break up traditional forms, but ignores the fact of their conscious or unconscious inheritance from the traditional essay form. Reading his articles together, we cannot but have the impression that he favors the “lyrical”, which is a more active artistic agent than the “epic”, whose “objective structures” look rather static and unchanging.

In fact he has not described the nature of the “objective epic forms” in traditional Chinese literature except to pinpoint their conventional, non-progressive nature. In the “Confrontation” article he mentions as illustration only the attempt of some late Qing writers (Wu Jingzi 吳敬梓 and Li Boyuan in particular) in painting a “broad social fresco” and compare their work with the new realistic novel by Mao Dun, Ding Ling 丁玲, and others (Průšek 1980: 79). His foregone conclusion is made possible by his conviction that “the revolution made a clean sweep of the old stock of literary forms. The more crystallized the form and the more categorical the adherence to it demanded, the more complete was its disappearance”. Thus “in poetry practically all the old forms have been

done away with because here norms were enforced most rigidly of all” (*ibid.*: 79). If so why did both Lu Xun and Yu Dafu choose to continue to write poetry in the classical form and did so brilliantly? And how does one account for the emergence of a modern Chinese epic-novel? And on the European side, did the same process take place or not? Was the First World War comparable to a revolution in causing the breakdown of traditional forms? And what about the case of Soviet Russia, which is positioned between the West and the East? The more I am mesmerized by Průšek’s grand comparison the more questions come to my mind. To help answer some of the questions, I began to seek more theoretical guidance from new sources. Two books proved helpful:

1. Ralph Freedman’s *The Lyrical Novel* is a somewhat theoretical treatise based on a detailed analysis of the works of three major writers – Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf. At first sight, these writers from three different countries have nothing in common. But Freedman nevertheless finds a common trait, which he defines as “lyrical”. According to him, the lyrical novel is a modern genre, a long prose form derived from the 19th-century novel. It has the following key characteristics: it is “plot-less” (thus comparable to Rozanov’s works *à la* Shklovsky?); its hero is more passive and pensive; and external action is turned into inward probing. Above all it depicts a world “reduced to a lyrical point of view, the equivalent of the poet’s ‘I’: the lyrical self” (Freedman 1963: 8). Such a technique is originally the formal property of poetry, especially Romantic poetry, but it is used in this special type of fiction which applies the technique of lyrical poetry – its reliance on subjective images and its pictorial qualities – to the narrative framework of the novel. In so doing, it deemphasizes plot in favor of poetic imagery and the temporal narrative is changed into “spatial form” (the term first coined by Joseph Frank). “Lyrical novels... exploit the expectation of narrative by turning it into its opposite: a lyrical process in the workings of the mind and imagination” (*ibid.*: 6). It turns narrative into “a voyage of discovery onto a strange subterranean sea in which the lyrical mood... is acted out in worlds of fiction populated by an imaginary of figures, emblazoned by an imagery of scenes” (*ibid.*: 283). According to Freedman, the lyrical novel as a new genre reached its prominence in the interwar period (hence a part of the lyrical current that flooded the European avant-garde?) and thereafter declined except in Germany.

Freedman’s model includes most of the formal features as in Průšek’s lyrical scheme, but gives a slightly different shading: the lyrical elements in the creative process seem to be more inward-oriented as it turns the “lyrical self” into self-probing and self-alienation from the outside world. As such it definitely does not have the revolutionary potential to break up traditional norms as Průšek argues in the case of modern Chinese literature.

Does this mean that since lyrical poetry in the European tradition does not carry the positive and “synthetic” power as in Chinese lyricism, hence its decline? Still, Freedman’s mode clarifies for us at least one point: the lyrical novel is evolved from the novel, not prose essays or shorter prose forms. It turns the narrative for realism into a more imaginary and symbolic form. As such its lyrical mood runs counter to revolutionary mood of modern Chinese fiction as described by Průšek. I can well imagine Průšek arguing along this line, that this basically German model does not fit China – with the possible exception of Yu Dafu, who openly acknowledged his indebtedness to German literature and in fact used lyrics in the German language in his early story “Moving south” (Nanqian 南遷). In his long discussion of Yu Dafu who is paired with Mao Dun as two

contrasting representatives, Průšek talks about Yu's stories in connection with European romanticism (Průšek 1980: 169). He cites Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (in German), a key Romantic text, and the Czech poet Vítězslav Nezval, but no novelists. He mentions a number of European and Japanese writers, but not Hesse, Gide and Virginia Woolf. Apparently Průšek has in mind a different genealogy of this European "flood of lyricism" whose progenitors consisted more of poets than novelists. Nor does he indicate its future fate, as for instance whether it would degenerate into kitsch. In this regard, I am reminded of a comment on European modernism by Milan Kundera, Průšek's former countryman:

"What was 'modern art,' that intriguing storm of the first third of the twentieth century? A radical revolt against the aesthetic of the past; that is obvious of course, except that the pasts were not alike. In France modern art... extended the great lyrical rebellion of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. It found its privileged expression in painting and, above all, in poetry, which was its chosen art. The novel, by contrast, was anathematized (most notably by surrealists); it was considered outmoded, forever sealed into its conventional form. In Central Europe the situation was different: opposition to the ecstatic, romantic, sentimental, musical tradition led the modernism of a few geniuses, the most original, toward the art that is the privileged sphere of analysis, lucidity, irony: that is, toward the novel" (Kundera 2006: 49).⁹

It was a pity that Průšek did not have an exchange of ideas with Kundera, since they both shared the Central European background. Yet Kundera's notion of the modern novel in Central Europe – as epitomized by "a few geniuses" such as Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, and Witold Gombrowicz – and his demand to concentrate only on the essentials of analysis, lucidity and irony is nowhere to be found in Průšek's article or, for that matter, in modern Chinese literature in general. For Průšek, the modern Chinese novel is inevitably bound with reality and the demand of realism, which unfolds a large socio-political fresco of human action, rather than Kundera's "thinking novels".

2. Franco Moretti's masterful book *Modern Epic* is basically a study of three masterworks: Goethe's *Faust*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Moretti 1996). But it offers nothing less than a theoretical construction of a new "super-genre", the modern epic. The new term is needed because, according to Moretti, the old world was changed forever. This explains Goethe's difficulty and long delay in writing the second part of *Faust*. The emergent "world system" which arrived in the early 20th century is driven by global capitalism, which the 19th century novel form no longer sufficed to accommodate. Thus in a way Moretti answers the question: what happened when the old epic forms were broken up. Answer: a new kind of modern epic as "world text", a form used in utterly diverse ways by Joyce and García Márquez.

Moretti's method owes much to Russian Formalism but supplements it with his own version of Darwin's theory of evolution as applied to literary history. Thus he considers Joyce's *Ulysses* not so much a lyrical work of stylistic experimentation or inward probing but as an objective "world text" which is filled both with a linguistic polyphony of styles and a plethora of material artifacts – all laid out in the textual surface (something akin to Shklovsky's view of Rozanov's works?). The modern epic is a text that tries to encompass

⁹ I am indebted to Guangchen Chen for this reference.

the totality of the contemporary world itself. In Joyce's novel it is mirrored in the city of Dublin, his hometown, which he tries to recapture "polyphonically" much as Dos Passos in *Manhattan Transfer* later seeks to do with New York. The enlarged space of the city is squeezed into a compressed time-frame of a day and a night.

In contrast, Průšek has mentioned Joyce several times, but all in a lyrical vein. Perhaps one could also claim, *à la* Moretti, that Li Boyuan's novel, *Brief History of Civilization* (discussed earlier), can also be regarded as a modern epic, for it seeks to capture a Chinese world of late Qing China across a large territorial span – all in the time-frame contemporaneous with the novel's writing, which is also a feature of Mao Dun's fiction.

One could explore more late Qing fiction texts along this line, if only to argue that their ambitious scope but incomplete structure (as compared to the classic 19th-century European novel) bespeaks the emergence of a new "half-baked" epic form that contains realistic, lyrical, parodistic, and even fantastic elements. It also suggests that the lyrical and the epic can co-exist and sometimes intermix, especially in a period of social turmoil and political transition such as the late Qing, the May Fourth period, and interwar years in Europe. We may also cast our gaze at the present and ask: whether the dialectic between the lyrical and the epic is manifested in contemporary (post-1949) Chinese literature or whether the era of revolutionary epic and epic time is gone forever.

A last tribute

After all that has been said, I still think Průšek – perhaps alone among his generation of European Sinologists – has set a great example of writing literary history. His theoretical insights have opened up new comparative vistas. Whatever quibbles and nit-picking we may still raise, we are forever in his debt.

REFERENCES

- Chan, Leonard K. K. (2008). "The Conception of Chinese Lyricism: Průšek's Reading of Chinese Literature Tradition." In Olga Lomová (ed.), *Paths toward Modernity: Conference to Mark the Centenary of Jaroslav Průšek*. Prague: The Karolinun Press, 19–32.
- Chan, Leonard K. K. (Chen Guoqiu 陳國球) and Wang, David (Wang Dewei 王德威) (2014). *Shuqing zhi xiandaixing: shuqing chuantong lunshu yu Zhongguo wenxue yanjiu* 抒情之現代性: 抒情傳統論述與中國文學研究 [The Modernity of Lyricism: Essays on Chinese Lyrical Tradition]. Beijing: Sanlian.
- Freedman, Ralph (1963). *The Lyrical Novel: Studies of Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gálik, Marian (1998). "Jaroslav Průšek: A Myth and Reality as Seen by His Pupil." *Asian and African Studies* (Bratislava) 7.2, 151–161.
- Hsia, C. T. (1961). *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction, 1917–1957*. New Haven: Yale University Press (new edition: Hong Kong: Chinese University of Press, 2016).
- Kundera, Milan (2006). *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*. New York: Harper/Collins.
- Lee, Leo Ou-fan (1985). "The Solitary Traveller: Images of Self in Modern Chinese Literature." In Robert E. Hegel and R. C. Hessney (edd.), *Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 282–307.

- Lee, Leo Ou-fan (2006). "Reminiscences of Professor Průšek: from Harvard to Prague." In *Milena Doleželová-Velingerová (ed.), Jaroslav Průšek 1906-2006 Remembered by His Friends*. Praha: DharmaGaia, 137–154.
- Lomová, Olga and Anna Zádrapová (2016). "'The Songs of Ancient China': The Myth of 'The Other' Appropriated by an Emerging Sinology." In Chih-yu Shih (ed.), *Sinology in Post-Communist States*. Hong-kong: The Chinese University Press, 189–211.
- Moretti, Franco (1996). *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*. New York: Verso.
- Průšek, Jaroslav (1969). *Three Sketches of Chinese Literature*. Praha: Academia.
- Průšek, Jaroslav (1980). *The Lyrical and the Epic: Studies of Modern Chinese Literature*. Edited by Leo Ou-fan Lee. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Shklovsky, Viktor (1991). *Theory of Prose*. English translation by Benjamin Sher. Dalkey Archive Press.
- Wang, David Der-Wei (2015). *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis*. New York: Columbia University Press.