

## Archetypes in William Empson's Poem "China"

Pan Xu<sup>1, a \*</sup>, Xiaotong Wang<sup>2, b</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Harbin Normal University, China

<sup>2</sup> Harbin Normal University, China

<sup>a</sup>hsdpan@qq.com, <sup>b</sup>2934973467@qq.com

\*corresponding author

**Keywords:** Chinese Culture; Archetype Criticism; "The Belt and Road"; Cultural Confidence

**Abstract:** As a theorist and poet in the 20th century, William Empson came to China to teach English literature in the 1930s, and he was also influenced by traditional Chinese culture when he played an important role in the development of Chinese poetry theories. This paper is based on Northrop Frye's archetype criticism, and analyzes the Chinese elements in the poem "China" from the perspective of comparative literature, in order to enable more readers to discover the charm and value of Chinese culture through the literary works of Empson, an international cultural exchange emissary, so that the cultural confidence of Chinese people under the vision of macro-construction of "The Belt and Road" in the new period can be better contributed.

### An Introduction of Northrop Frye's Archetype Criticism

Archetypal criticism can be traced back to the 1920s and the theory reached its peak in the 1950s. Its earliest theoretical miniature originated from English classical ritual theory. After that, cultural anthropology represented by James Fraser and the collective unconsciousness represented by Carl Jung were integrated into it. Jung believed that the content of collective unconsciousness is the archetype. Therefore, the most important thing of the archetype is unconsciousness. In other words, "All psychological reactions have a priori form of general agreement." [1] Northrop Frye, a Canadian scholar, is the epitome of archetypal criticism theory. His masterpiece, *Anatomy of criticism*, is known as the code of archetype research. In this book, he redefined the concept of the archetype and combined his research with the results of Fraser and Jung, which makes the concept of the archetype go into the field of literature.

### The Origin of Empson and China

As early as 1933, Empson came to visit China and China left a deep impression on him. When he firstly saw the Forbidden City of Beijing, he could not help admiring this gorgeous ancient architecture as the only "government's tools instead of one's vanity grave." [2] In 1937, with the recommendation of his teacher, I.A.Richards, Empson came to China once again so that he formally began to teach English literature in this piece of broad and magical land. In 1947, he had his third visit to China, this was also the last time he had been here and he brought his wife and children to live together in China for a long time. Also, their family participated in the founding ceremony of China in 1949. He did not leave this piece of unforgettable land until 1952 since the British authorities no longer allowed him to apply for the extension of teaching in China. The literary theories Empson taught in China directly influenced the development of the later poetry theories of China, particularly in modern poetry theories. Many famous scholars later in China all spoke highly of this British poet, such as Kejia Yuan, Zhouhan Yang, Zuoliang Wang and so on. Professor Zuoliang Wang evaluated Empson as: "The poetry theories he dispersed in China has deeply integrated into the language and writing skills of many Chinese young poets." [3]

### The Chinese Elements in the Poem of "China"

In *Anatomy of criticism*, Frye explained the function of literary archetypes in details. He held that: “As the archetype is the communicable symbol, archetypal criticism is primarily concerned with literature as a social fact and as a mode of communication.” [4] Therefore, it can be seen that Frye aimed to find the common cultural expression behind works of all kinds of writers from different regions and periods through comparing and analyzing the classical archetypes. And Empson’s description of traditional Chinese culture in “China” is actually the western displacement of the three classical cultural archetypes in Confucianists’ ritual and music, Taoist’s valuing softness and the Great Wall and dragon culture. Therefore, we will make a comparative analysis of the traditional Chinese archetypes in William Empson’s poem “China” through combining with social background of China in different periods separately.

**Ritual and Music Culture.** Empson once wrote in “China”: “They will not teach Japanese/ They rule by music and by rites.” [5] Also, in the note of this poem, he mentioned his point of view of ruling countries with ritual and music culture which the great philosopher Confucius vigorously advocated: “Confucius of course believed in ruling by music and by rites.” [5] However, Confucius’s opinions mainly originated from Emperor Wen of Zhou Dynasty, that is the Duke Zhou. Cao Cao once wrote “A Short-Song Ballad” to express his appreciation for the Duke Zhou and the ambition of himself to unify the whole country. While the Duke Zhou’s theories of ruling countries are able to found in *The Spring and Autumn Annals*: “The deceased father the Duke Zhou made the rite of Zhou Dynasty: ‘To observe one’s character from its daily routines / To judge one’s ability from its character / To measure one’s achievements from its ability / To serve people from its achievements.’ ” [6] The Duke Zhou’s a few words reveals the conditions of becoming a wise monarch: at first, one should treat other people with appropriate etiquette, and then, one should have good characters, at last, one should have the ability to handle affairs properly. Only with the above three conditions, can he have the possibilities of making great achievements. However, these three prerequisites do not exist in isolation. In contrast, they exist in order and interconnect with each other. Thus it can be seen that the Duke Zhou is not only an excellent politician, but also a well-admired philosopher. And there are also similar records in *The Book of Rites*: “When the deceased father established rites, the rite he made had its foundations and regulations, faithfulness is the foundation of the rite, righteousness is the regulation of the rite.” [7] Therefore, we can conclude that “rite” should not only have its regulations--reasonable and appropriate, but also have its foundations--faithful and trustworthy. The time of Confucius lived is in the last period of Western Zhou Dynasty, that is the Spring and Autumn period in history. At that time, the social order was chaotic, and the rite and music had long been corrupted. Therefore, as a philosopher, Confucius decided to make a deep analysis of the ritual and music system in the heyday of the Duke Zhou. Thus in *The Analects of Confucius*, Confucius said: “If a man is not benevolent, what is the use of etiquette? / If a man is unkind, what is the use of music?” [8] Here it can be seen that the theory of Confucius in rite and music is very similar to that of the Duke Zhou, which means if someone wants to be an excellent leader, he should be faithful and righteous and know the essence of the rite and music culture. Only in this way can he really be popular with the masses.

The poem “China” was created in early 1938, at that time, China was in a period of extraordinary unrest. Fascist Japan launched the famous shock of the country’s “Lugou Bridge Incident”, and then, they quickly occupied Beijing and Tianjin. Therefore, the three institutions of higher education in China--Peking University, Tsinghua University and Nankai University were forced to move to the south of the country. After a short stay in Changsha of Hunan, due to the tense situation at that time, the three universities finally moved to Mengzi in Yunnan, and thus the three institutions merged into one university which named as Southwest United University. As a foreign professor, Empson also followed these gifted students and excellent teachers overcoming a lot of difficulties physically and mentally. However, when they finally arrived in Mengzi of Yunnan, Empson found that these gifted students despised the people of the tribe there. Therefore, He reported to British officials in 1938: “these delicate girls dressed in high forked cheongsam and meat-colored stockings in the United University called the locals as “primitive men”. They adopted a domineering and evasive attitude towards the local tribes of the non-Han ethnic group and they thought that: “The Miaos people

might eat them.” [2] However, for Empson, he appreciated the behavior of the Miaos, as this British professor was totally impressed by the locals’ embroidered “square skirts” and bracelet necklaces. After all, the students from these three institutions were set great hopes by the local leaders. One of the local generals, Chen Cheng, said to the students: “When Chinese people were liberated, your mission is to be the leader of the whole country”. [2] In Empson’s point of view, it is very clear that these so-called future leaders do not show enough respect for the local ethnic group people, they acted nothing worthwhile but only treated the tribesmen there in a condescending manner. Therefore, in an article, he wrote: “The strict norms of politeness of the Chinese elites are no longer taught to young people.” [2] Empson thought that the essence of Chinese ritual and music culture gradually died down among the Chinese elites. These young students were born in the coastal developed cities, and they had gotten used to the tradition of western culture. However, it doesn’t mean that they are able to have enough reasons to give up the best part of their own country’s culture. It is China that has the cultural characteristics of the local ethnic minorities instead of other western countries. Therefore, these future leaders should not only not despise their own culture, but also should hold in awe and veneration and try to retain the cultural soil that may fade out from China with the development of the times. As Empson commented on BBC: “For those educated Chinese people, the real problem is not to integrate with western culture, but to integrate with their own working people. In other words, the ruling class has never found a goal to connect with their own workers and farmers.” [2]

By contrast, Empson greatly admired the current president of Yunnan Province, Long Yun. And it is also Long Yun that made him change his stereotype of Chinese feudal warlords. In an unpublished letter, Empson said: “The current provincial president is very important because he is able to maintain order to a large extent.” [2] And it is mainly reflected in Long Yun’s reasonable handling of the relationship between local ethnic minorities and the national government. Before Long Yun took over the province in 1927, the whole of Yunnan Province was in a long period of chaos. When Long Yun was at the helm of Yunnan, he gave a lot of active support of anti-Japanese movement towards the national government. In 1938, more than one-third of the 100 households who had no knowledge of Chinese before in the Naxi area joined the armed forces of the Han nationality, which directly changed Empson’s former definition of the China as “an unstable state”. In addition, after Empson’s returned to Britain in 1942, he also specially praised Long Yun’s construction of the Burma road in a report of BBC: “It is through Long Yun’s efforts that makes this almost vertical high-difficulty projects of six hundred miles, up to eight thousand feet tall and through some of the most difficult mountain villages in the world completed on time.” [2]

Thus it can be seen that, as a foreign professor who taught in China at that time, Empson noticed the huge gap in thought and behavior between elite students and tribal residents in China at that time from the point of view of a bystander. He held that China as a country with a long-standing culture of rites and music, no matter in which era, elites should deeply understand the essentials of rites and music by opening to arguments, serving people with actions and persuading the masses with virtue integrity. Only with more responsible leaders like Long Yun, Chinese people can unite to defeat Japanese fascists.

**The Valuing Softness in Taoist’s Culture.** As for the poem “China”, Empson once noted: “The idea of learning wisdom by not worrying and of getting your way by yielding, as in water, of course go a long way back into Chinese thought.” [5] Therefore, we can see that the author thought a man can get wisdom only if he is as weak as water. Laozi believed that water is the weakest thing in the world. Just as its weakness, water are volunteered to be in a disadvantageous position and nourish all the things, so as to live in harmony with all the things and finally achieve a carefree environment. In the last verse of this poem, Empson wrote: “A liver fluke of sheep agrees / Most rightly proud of her complacencies / With snail so well they make one piece.” [5] Therefore, we can see that snails have the same indisputable wisdom as water in the face of the invasion of the liver fluke. Although the liver fluke was proud of the harassment of the host snail for a while, the snail still brought the enemy into its own body and won the final substantial victory.

Empson’s description of snails and liver flukes is actually a vivid portrayal of Japan’s invasion of

China at that time. After waging a full-scale war of aggression against China, Japan quickly occupied the three top institutions of Peking, Tsinghua and Nankai university. After that, almost all the buildings and equipment of three universities were totally destroyed by Japanese militarists. Thus it can be seen that the madness of Japanese militarism is like the temporarily succeeded liver fluke. While in the face of the strong offensive of the Japanese army at that time, the three top institutions in China had its tenderness and indisputable wisdom as water. Just as the headmaster of Nankai University, Boling Zhang said: "The Japanese enemy can destroy my Nankai body, but it will not destroy its soul." [2] Empson also lamented at the time: "It would be an interesting idea if Oxford and Cambridge could come to Barrow together under these circumstances and the two sides would not quarrel very much and unite together." [2] Moreover, in Empson's poem "Autumn on Nan-Yueh", we can also feel the enthusiasm of his communication with Chinese students and teachers under arduous conditions: "Let textual variants be discussed / We teach a poem as it grew." [5] Therefore, these three universities chose to temporarily keep away from the sharp edges of Japanese army and retreat southward, although the army was temporarily defeated, Chinese elites formed an unprecedented academic exchange resonance.

On the other hand, after Empson followed these students coming to Yunnan, many local ethnic minorities who used to have serious conflicts with the Hans aroused a strong sense of patriotism as a result of Japanese armies' savage actions, such as killing, plundering all the way and trampling horses at will into the lush rice fields of the local farmers: "The most Proust-style atrocity in cities and towns has not prevented this country from doing this." [2] Also, a customs official named Murphy who had always hated the Hans began to call the army of the Hans "our troops". When Empson went to Dali in Yunnan, the salt mine manager's words made him very impressed after he visited the local salt mine: "Thanks to the war, or the mine is able to be mechanized for at least 20 years." [2]

Therefore, although the liver fluke Japan had succeeded in a brief invasion of Chinese territories, what Japanese people did not realize is that the corresponded host China is like water in Taoism culture which can draw more energy from the soft and weak state with a temporary concession. In spirit culture, Chinese institutions of higher learning broken the inherent characteristic barriers between schools. Elite students with different ideological styles gathered together unprecedentedly and collided with magic academic sparks. In national construction, the arrogance of the Japanese army aroused strong nationalistic sentiments of ethnic groups in the whole country. They began to ignore the original hatred among themselves, and actively took part in the construction of various local organizations to fight foreign invaders by uniting one another, which is an important prerequisite of a strong country to include more foreign cultures.

**The Great Wall and Dragon Culture.** Once Empson wanted to find a way out of town in Mengzi of Yunnan. When he climbed over peaks rising one another and finally reached the top of the mountain, a village hidden in the mountain caught his eyes, and at that moment he was attracted by the winding rice fields in the mountain. Therefore, he praised the undulating texture of rice fields and compared them to the Great Wall winding between steep mountains in the note of the poem "China": "The paddy fields...have the same surprising jerking texture as the Great Wall making its way round precipitous hills." [5] While in the poem of "China", Empson compared the rice field of Great Wall's undulating texture with the winding dragon: "The paddy-fields are wings of bees / The Great Wall as a dragons crawls..." [5] Thus it can be seen that Empson had a profound understanding of dragon in the Chinese culture, as dragon is an evil symbol in the eyes of the west. And there are some reasons Empson compared the Great Wall to the winding dragon. The first reason is the similarity of form. As a large ancient architecture of more than 20,000 kilometers across the east and west, the continuous and undulating majestic posture of the Great Wall is like a dragon winding its way off. The second reason is the construction of the Great Wall and people's consciousness of the dragon in the ancient time, which reflects the Chinese people's awe of nature and the hope to live in harmony with each other. The builders of the ancient Great Wall did not blindly destroy the original natural environment around them in the process of construction just to achieve the purpose of defense. On the contrary, they fully investigated and made use of their

geographical advantages, such as the effective repair and transformation of mountains, cliffs and rivers, so as to form many strong and natural defense barriers and resist the southward invasion of the northern nationalities. Dragon as a kind of psychic beast of ancient times, In *Origin of Chinese Characters*, it can be explained as “Dragon, the leader of the squamose animals, can be fine and thick, can be short and long, it will fly in the sky at the spring equinox and duck underwater at the autumn equinox.” [9] Thus it can be seen that Dragon in the consciousness of the ancients is also able to change its own according to the surrounding environment and adapt to the cycle change of the solar terms. In addition, the formation of dragons and the Great Wall is a witness to the integration of tribal people. In the ancient society, each ethnic group has its own unique totem animal symbol, and each tribe will fight each other. Whenever one tribe defeat another tribe, they will put a body part of the other tribal totem animals on their own tribal totem animals. Finally, The totem animal logo of the winning tribe combines the features of a number of tribal totem animals. This is the feature of the dragon that we are familiar with on a daily basis: “the head of a horse, the horn of a deer, the claws of a dog, the scales and whiskers of a fish...” [10] As the Great Wall is the longest artificial architecture in the world, its long construction process also reflects the blend of the tribes. During the Spring and Autumn period, in order to reduce the harassment of the northern barbarian tribes, Yan State built more than 2,000 miles of the Great Wall in order to defend the enemy, which also extends the advanced mode of social production to the land of the wild at the same time. During the Western Han Dynasty, the emperor ordered a large-scale migration to the successful expedition region while the Great Wall was built, thus contributing to the cultural communication between the Huns and the Han people. Many ethnic minorities, either for political reasons or forced by life, also moved to live near the Great Wall after the Southern and Northern Dynasties of Wei Jin. In a word, the construction of the Great Wall effectively promoted the integration of farmers and nomadic tribes in the central and north of China. And the integration is like the fusion of the liver fluke and snails, which is at the end of the poem, just as the note Empson wrote: “Japanese are merely a branch of the same culture...” [5] In the book *A brief history of Japan*, there are records about the envoys of the Qin Dynasty crossing to the east: “ Xu Fu conducted a group of three thousand men and women to the east. As a result, Xu Fu did not get the medicine he wanted. Finally, he chose to stay here and did not go back.” [11] And the dragon itself is the product of multicultural fusion. Therefore, in Empson’s eyes, although China was temporarily defeated by the Japanese, China as a country with a long history of dragon culture will certainly draw more experience and strength from its thousands years’ social and cultural collision in the near future and become an indispensable part of national culture in the world.

## Conclusions

As a cultural ambassador between China and Britain, William Empson came to China in the 1930s. He kept his chin up difficulties and devoted himself to the teaching activities of the Southwest United University. He used his “Cambridge Criticism Method” [12] to make many Chinese students have a new understanding of English metaphysical poetry in the 17th century, especially for ambiguous poetics, which inspired them to apply these poetic theories to their own poems. Therefore, it can be seen that Empson contributed to the transformation of “Nine Leaves School” from the original romanticism to Chinese modernism to a large extent. While sowing the seeds of western poetics to the land of China, Empson also experienced the charm of Chinese culture from the usual teacher-students interaction and unconsciously applied it to his later literary creation. His meticulous depiction of the Confucian, Taoist, the Great Wall and dragon culture is the actually a western-style transformation of the ancient Chinese civilization, which in turn attracts and inspires more people to notice and pay attention to the charm of Chinese ancient civilization. At the same time, this is also the concrete embodiment of culture in which the President Xi put forward the “The Belt and Road ” initiative in 2014. Just in this year on November 10, President Xi published an article entitled “Let the Wisdom of Ancient Civilizations Look after the Future” in the Greek media. In this article, President Xi not only pointed out the cultural similarities between China and Greece through a number of powerful historical examples, but also put forward more earnestly that

China and Greece should excavate the profound wisdom of the same ancient civilization, so that the macro-stragic goal of demonstrating our profound historical culture can be better achieved. Therefore, with the archetype criticism theory of Northrop Frye, it is not only the concrete cultural response to the “The Belt and Road” initiative by analyzing the implicit Chinese element in this poem from the perspective of comparative literature, but also is an important promotion to the construction of the Chinese people’s cultural confidence in the eyes of the people in the world.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper is a phased result of the “2019 Postgraduate Academic Innovation Project of Harbin Normal University (HSDSSCX2019-64)”.

### **References**

- [1] C. Jung: *Psychology and Literature* (Sanlian Bookstore Press, China 1987), p.52. (In Chinese)
- [2] J. Haffenden: *William Empson: Among the Mandarins* (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, China 2016), p.512, 527, 530, 537, 569, 577, 579, 594, 595. (In Chinese)
- [3] Z.L. Wang: *Foreign Literature*, Vol. 12 (1987) No.4, p.61. (In Chinese)
- [4] N. Frye: *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, Canada 1957), p.99.
- [5] W. Empson: *Collected Poems* (Chatto&Windus, Britain 1956), p.70, 71, 74, 115, 116, 117.
- [6] B.J. Yang: *Spring and Autumn’s Notes* (Chinese Books Press, China 2018), p.542. (In Chinese)
- [7] L.Z. Dong: *The Book of Rites’ Full Notes* (Chinese Textile Press, China 2018), p.102. (In Chinese)
- [8] X. Qian: *The Analects of Confucius* (National Library Publishing House, China 2017), p.96. (In Chinese)
- [9] Z.Q. Liu: *Chinese Culture*, Vol. 2 (2012) No.2, p.12. (In Chinese)
- [10] C.M. Ji: *Hunan Socialist Academic Journal*, Vol.17 (2013) No.1, p.59. (In Chinese)
- [11] J.Y. Zhao: *Ocean World*, Vol. 24 (2016) No.7, p.79. (In Chinese)
- [12] L. Cao: *Foreign Literature*, Vol. 16 (2018) No.6, p.164. (In Chinese)