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Wen-chin Ouyang on Bringing Together Arabic أدب and Chinese 文

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The first part of this interview with [Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature Wen-chin Ouyang](#) appeared in a British Academy email newsletter titled “[What is comparative literature?](#)” and reappears here with permission:

The British Academy: What book do you always return to?



Wen-chin

Ouyang: I have been thinking of bringing Arabic *adab* (أدب) and Chinese *wen* (文) together in a comparative project and look at the ways in which the very value of the humanities today—that educated individuals are more than the money they make and the goods and services they produce; rather, it is about the problems they help solve and the way in which

they interact with the wider world—has always been an integral part of thought and action in human history. Ibn al-Jawzi (1116-1201) sums up in *Dhamm al-Hawa* (In Censure of Desire) what desire for power, wealth and pleasure can make a human being behave in a way that is destructive to both the individual and community. Educating wily desire into structured reason is the only way to rescue both individual and community from the brink of destruction. Arabic stories, from the *Arabian Nights* to love mad poets, and Chinese novels, such as [The Plum in the Golden Vase](#) (17th century) and [Dream of the Red Chamber](#) (18th century), interrogate and manage how different forms of power, including political authority and wealth, incite desire and at the same stimulate contemplation of what ‘proper conduct’ around destructive self-interest and abuse of power ought to be. Arabic *adab* and Chinese *wen* are, very similar to the humanities today, the site on which the tension between self-interest and greater good, pleasure and responsibility, thought and conduct is grappled with. This is perhaps why I have been mesmerized by the contemporary creative adaptations of Chinese classic novels this past month.

The British Academy: Have you started something new?

Wen-chin Ouyang: I have discovered on [Youtube The Story of Minglan \(知否知否應是綠肥紅瘦\)](#), a 73-episode TV drama that has not only amalgamated *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Plum in the Golden Vase* but also modernized them. It weaves together two powerful classes in a fictional Song Dynasty (960-1279), the political elite and the mercantile rich, and shows how it is possible for both men and women to navigate the networks of power connecting individuals, families and political community, while maintaining a principled position and behaving properly in a world of conflicting desires, abuse of power, and intertwined political and social conspiracies. Its harem politics escalates Jane Austen’s social-climbing stories to political discourses, and the entanglement of harem and court in its storyline modernizes classical Arabic and Chinese fiction to show how our private life is invested in the community’s political life. More importantly, it has connected for me my three literary cultures: the contemporary humanities, pre-modern Arabic *adab*, and classical Chinese *wen*. What an exciting unexpected harvest of the pandemic season!

The British Academy: What’s one piece of interesting advice you can give us for this time that you’ve learnt from your subject?

Wen-chin Ouyang: Tomorrow is another day. Let’s not give in or give up.

ArabLit: What, for you, do the contemporary televised adaptations (such as *The Story of Minglan*) illuminate? Issues of transmission, the movement of stories through space and time?

Wen-chin Ouyang: Adaptations of all kinds reflect our present concerns more than our interest in what actually happened in the past. The Chinese TV costume dramas I have seen have a knack for bringing the past into conversation with the present. The various cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare around the world are intercultural dialogues in this sense. This dialogue in the 2006 Chinese rendition of Hamlet, *The Banquet* (夜宴), directed by Feng Xiaogang and starring Zhang Ziyi, is triangulated, perhaps even quadrangulated, whereby the conversation between past and present in European and American cinemas are inserted in the dialogue between Chinese past and present. Seeing Oedipal Complex in interpretations of

pre-modern Chinese cultural expressions tends to throw me off. It is not how the Chinese, and for that matter Arabs, deal with incest or ‘wiles of women’, or is it? The other feature in Chinese costume dramas that intrigues me is what I would call the ‘ideology of monogamy’ that informs stories set in the polygamous past. This ‘ideology’ seems more present in TV dramas than, let us say, historical novels or even novels set in the past. Another fantastical costume drama saturated in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Tang poetry, and Chinese *wen* culture is the 2019 *Joy of Life*(慶餘年), which pits the ‘ideology of monogamy’ against polygamy to show the difference between loyalty, as both culture and conduct, and self-interest. It is as if ‘monogamy’ is a byword for an ethical way of living, and ‘polygamy’ for selfish impropriety, corruption and tyranny. This modernized ideal man-woman relationship overlaps with the idealized friendship, often described as brotherhood, and together they speak of an ethical worldview that must underpin individual behaviour, social interaction and political participation. These are all the indispensable ingredients of what makes us human.

ArabLit: Are there particular Arabic and Chinese texts you would like to put in a constellation/conversation, or triangulate with our contemporary understanding of humanities? What makes the joining of *adab* and *wen* such rich ground?

Wen-chin Ouyang: When I first saw Harold Bloom’s 1998 *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human*, I was infuriated and perturbed at the same time. I do love Shakespeare, but to claim that because by creating characters like Hamlet he invented the human would be to wipe out the entire history of human endeavor to come to grips with being born and alive, with the ability to feel and think, with passion and reason, with how to live meaningfully, and with mortality and desire for immortality. But the idea of ‘altering human consciousness’ at the heart of Bloom’s argument is useful for us to think about possibilities for change and to hope for a better future. I come back to the ‘ideology of monogamy’ and how it informs contemporary translations and adaptations of classics, particularly in how they rewrite gender relations and inscribe a visible role for women in brokering social cohesion and political stability. This is the type of transformation that offers entry points into a three-way inter-temporal as well as inter-cultural conversations. I am keen on friendship that overlaps with brotherhood and gender and how these three paradigms are sites of meditation and mediation on what it means to be human in Arabic, Chinese and English literatures. These are explored in different genres of writing, however, and it is not possible to compare like to like generically. Arabic *adab* treatises on love and friendship, such as 11th century Ibn Hazm’s *Tawq al-hamama* (The Ring of the Dove) and Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi’s *Al-sadaqa wa l-sadiq* (Friendship and Friends) are already in dialogue with stories of mad love and the *Arabian Nights* and can easily be brought into further conversation with Shakespeare and classic Chinese novels, such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Plum in the Golden Vase* and *Water Margins*, and more. The development of friendship-brotherhood into sisterhood in contemporary cultural and literary expressions is also fascinating for me. How do we get from Jane Austen, the *Arabian Nights* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* to *The Story of Minglan* and the flourishing stories of women’s solidarity around the world today? What impact will this new sisterhood paradigm have on our imaginings of community?

ArabLit: So I know of pre-modern movement from Chinese sources into Arabic literatures (stories such as those in the *Thousand and One Nights*, travelers’ tales such as Abu Zayd al-Sirafi’s), but do we also know of the reverse?

Wen-chin Ouyang: China has been present in Arabic discourses from as early as the Muslim Prophet is quoted as having said, ‘Seek knowledge even in China’! China is present in the

Arabian Nights and a number of Arabic travelogues, including al-Sirafi's [9th century Accounts of China and India](#), and the world famous 14th century [Travels of Ibn Battuta](#). The Middle East and the world of Islam are equally present in Chinese cultural life. We know that the Mongols connected the Asian East with the Asian West in unprecedented ways. We also know that Muslims played an important role in the government bureaucracy in Ming China. We see cultural exchange in objects, paints, cuisines, music, dance, and clothing, which travelled with traders, artists, craftsmen, indentured workers and slaves. These leave traces in literary works. Ideas, worldviews, poetics and stories tend to be harder to trace simply because they can get absorbed into the fabric of language and in time lose their so-called foreignness. That some stories in the *Arabian Nights* are set in China does not necessarily mean the stories come from China. By the same token, the presence of Islam and Muslims in Chinese cultural life and its influence in Chinese literary expressions has yet to be explored.