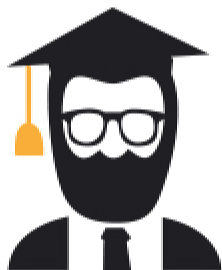

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# Poetry in the Chinese Tradition

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Despite the claims of poets and lovers of poetry, it is a simple fact that lyric poetry has never played a direct or forceful role in Western civilization. Other forms of literature have played a large, if usually unacknowledged role: dreams of Homer drove Alexander the Great to conquests, and Nero played at being the divine tragedian both in the empire and on the stage. In more recent times motion pictures embody desires and values, and this art form shapes timid imitations in our daily lives. But unlike the narrative and dramatic forms, lyric poetry has always been a peculiar and singular occupation, uneasily honored by a few and largely ignored by most. However, in Chinese civilization poetry has been and remains an important part of the way in which the Chinese have understood themselves and their past. The differences in the role of poetry in the two civilizations is largely a consequence of different conceptions of what poetry is and what is achieved through it.

The Western concept of literature developed out of ancient epic and drama: narrating and acting out stories. The most popular forms of literature today—novels and motion pictures—have grown out of that tradition. The best Western lyric poetry has remained close to epic and drama and has shared their values of creation and making (the etymological meaning of "poetry" is "making"). Poetry tells tales, recounts or recreates visions, and speaks of the self through masks, as in a play. Such poems are the work of poets, who see themselves and are seen by others as a breed apart: writing poems is simply not a part of the average person's everyday life. Perhaps many people write poems in youth and

All translations in this chapter are my own. The T'ang poems appear in slightly different versions in my book, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).





have dreams of being a poet, but the public acclaim that accompanies that dream is given to few; and denied such acclaim, the impulse to write poetry usually withers.

The Chinese lyric was conceived very differently and occupied a very different place in Chinese society. It was a companionable art, for private and social use; and though one might dream of achieving fame for one's poetry, the rarity of such fame in no way undermined the pleasure or value in the act of writing. The lyric poem is defined as *yen chih*, "to articulate what is in the mind intensely." Put simply, the Chinese lyric at its best was conceived as the highest form of speaking to someone else, an activity appropriate to all human beings on certain occasions and in certain states of mind.

The desire for such a general human poetry has not been entirely absent in the Western tradition, but powerful illusions about the specialness of the poetic vocation made this desire questionable. The poet William Wordsworth once gave a definition of poetry that seemed to approach the Chinese definition: he said that poetry was "a man speaking to men." This famous definition was a special moment in the history of Western poetry; Wordsworth tried to articulate the impulse toward a lyric poetry that would be truly different from the novel or drama. But the history of Western literature led him to phrase his definition in the wrong way, and that misphrasing made it impossible to escape the archaic Western concept of literature. When he said "a man speaking to *men*," he saw lyric poetry as addressing a collective plural, as in epic and drama. Whoever speaks to everyone speaks to no one in particular.

The Chinese understood the lyric as speaking not to humanity as a whole but to *someone* else, some person or group the poet knew or even someone of another age and place, someone the poet would like to know. This someone would be a person the poet hoped would come to know *him* through the poem. The Chinese had a rich vocabulary for writing about poetry, but within that rich vocabulary there is no term quite like the Western word "audience," the collective plural of Wordsworth's "a man speaking to men." The term that Chinese writers on poetry used instead for a good reader was *chih-yin*, "the one who knows the tone," and that term goes back to an old story in the Taoist text *Lieh-tzu:*

> Po-ya was a master in playing the lute, and Chung-tzu-ch'i was a master in listening. When Po-ya played his lute, his mind might be fixed on climbing a high mountain; then Chung-tzu-ch'i would say, "Wonderful! Uprearing and towering like Mount T'ai." Then Po-ya's thoughts might turn to the flowing water, and Chung-tzu-ch'i would say, "Wonderful! Rolling on in floods like the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers." And whatever was in Po-ya's mind, Chung-tzu-ch'i knew it.
>
> Once Po-ya wandered by the dark northern slope of Mount T'ai and suddenly came on a terrible storm. He stopped beneath a cliff, his heart

full of melancholy. Then he took his lute and played it, first a melody of the downpour, then the tones of the mountain itself crashing down. And every melody he played, Chung-tzu-ch'i followed his excitement to the fullest. Then Po-ya put down his lute and said with a sigh, "Wonderful is *your* ability to listen. The images you see in *your* mind are just like those in my own. How could I conceal any sound from you?" (*Lieh-tzu*)

The *chih-yin*, the "one who knows the tone," is the good reader of poetry, and the phrase has a rich resonance; it is also a particular kind of friend, a person whose sympathetic nature and willing familiarity make that person able to see through the music (or the words of a poem) to the other person and his or her state of mind. In the course of its long history, a poem might discover a million *chih-yin*, but these *chih-yin* never make an "audience." Every time the poem meets a good reader like Chung-tzu-ch'i the relation is private, personal, and unique. This definition is not at all an unreasonable model for literature; it is, after all, the way we relate to other people in our lives, whereas finding a willing audience is as rare as being a poet.

In contrast to Wordsworth's "man speaking to men," the Chinese lyric is someone speaking to someone else. The motives in such speaking may be grand or petty: to complain about a social abuse, to explain one's position in a political crisis, to state one's most cherished values, to give an account of visiting a mountain, to talk about depression, or even just to tell what the poet did that day. This speaking may have much "meaning" in the Western literary sense or it may have little. But if you become the good reader and friend of the poet, you are interested in the poem because you care about the person, and the poem's complexity is the complexity of a human being.

The relation formed in the poetic act does not need to be confined to people in the present. The Confucian philosopher Mencius once spoke of the impulse to form friendships with others: a person looks for friends on an ever wider scope until finally that person is compelled to go beyond the present and read the works of the ancients. Mencius called this "going beyond to make friends." In hope of such a relation a person might write poems with his eyes on the future.

In a basic way Chinese poetry becomes a way to create community, both speaking to others in the present and creating a living community across time. To a reader in the nineteenth or twentieth century, the eighth-century poet Tu Fu can be as real a person as anyone in the everyday world. Poetry is seen as a means to know others and to make oneself known to others. This function helps to explain some of the uses of poetry in the Chinese tradition that are often surprising to Western readers. For example, writing poetry was used in the civil service examination to qualify a person for holding public office. This example would be a bizarre use of poetry in the Western sense of the term, but if the



poem reveals "what kind of person" the writer is, then it can become an important way to judge someone's suitability for office.

To understand the powerful role of poetry in Chinese civilization it is necessary to look to the beginnings of poetry. These origins, out of which the kind of poetry I have been describing took shape over a span of many centuries, can be traced to the history of one of the Confucian Classics, the *Shih ching*, or *Book of Songs*. The *Book of Songs* is a collection of over three hundred songs composed between about 1000 B.C. and 600 B.C., when the collection reached its present form. These songs represent every aspect of life in the Chou dynasty: ritual hymns to the Chou ancestors, ballads about the founding of the Chou dynasty and its wars of expansion, moral poems, marriage poems, banquet songs, and folk poems.

To the reader familiar with early Western poetry and the archaic religious writings of Near Eastern civilization, the most striking characteristic of these Chinese songs is the absence of terror. There is reverence for the spirits and much human unhappiness, but there is little of the terror at the arbitrary actions of an incomprehensible deity or the terror at the same fearsome forces at work in human beings. Greek myths of origin often begin with a rape or murder. But in the first stanza of the song "Birth of the People" Chiang Yuan founds the house of Chou as an act of her own will, controlling the god through ritual:

The one who first gave birth to the people
Was the Lady Chiang Yuan.
How did she give birth to the people?
By the rites she made and the sacrifices,
To be no longer childless
She walked on the toeprint of the god,
Then became fertile, then increased,
Was made pregnant, was soon delivered,
Gave birth and nurtured,
And this was Hou Chi.

As so often occurs in stories about divine infants in folktales everywhere, Hou Chi, Prince Millet, the founder of the House of Chou, is exposed to the elements. But unlike similar stories in other civilizations, "Birth of the People" shows little interest in why the exposure occurs. The infant Hercules strangled serpents that Hera sent to kill him; but Hou Chi, exposed in the wilderness, is protected and fostered by nature's creatures. Even so, the exposure and the protection scarcely matter, occupying only one stanza of the song. Most of the song is devoted to a loving enumeration of the kinds of grains that grew from Hou Chi's planting and to a celebration of the phases of the agrarian cycle. The song ends by bringing the ancient cycle and its rites up to the present.

Tell us about the sacrifice—
The grain is pounded, the grain is baled,
The grain is winnowed and trampled.
We wash it until it is thoroughly soaked,
Steam it until it is all steamed through.
Then we consider, then we plan,
On a southernwood fire we sacrifice fat,
And take a ram for the rite of the road-god.
Then we roast it, then broil it,
To initiate the succeeding year.

It fills the platters
The platters and the tubs.
And when the fragrance begins to rise,
The god on high takes it with pleasure,
For the scent is good indeed.
Hou Chi founded these rites,
And the people have in no way failed in them,
From then all the way until now.

This immense confidence in the stability of the rites and of the relations between gods and humans is not likely to lead to tragedy or to curses that follow from generation to generation. It does, however, lead to a different sense of beauty, one based not on mystery but on the balance and order of the relationship between humans and the natural or spirit world.

In the centuries that followed the completion of the *Book of Songs* Chou civilization crumbled, and its feudatories became the Warring States. Although society endured terrible suffering in this period, those evils seemed to be the result of human error—terrible enough but possible to correct and not based in any transcendent mystery of the universe and its deity.

Much of the *Book of Songs* consists of what seem to be folk songs that contain motifs common to folk poetry everywhere.

There is a dead doe in the wilds,
All wrapped in white rushes.
There is a girl whose thoughts are of spring,
A gentleman led her astray.

There are bushes in the forest,
A dead deer in the wilds,
All bound around with white rushes,
There is a girl white as marble.

"Slowly now, and gently—
Don't touch my apron,
Don't make the dogs bark!"

The comparison of lost virginity and the death of an animal can be found in folk poetry the world over. However, the closing changes the



common song of seduction. The girl speaks up in protest, but her admonition is directed to her worries about waking the dogs and, through their barking, waking her family.

The *Book of Songs* was the beginning of Chinese poetry, and it was a beginning in lyric rather than in epic and drama. In its maturity Chinese poetry owes much to these origins but less to the *Book of Songs* itself than to the long and complicated history of the use and interpretation of its ancient songs. Through that history of interpretation the *Book of Songs* became the archetype for all poetry. During the period after the anthology took its final form, learning the *Book of Songs* by heart became an essential part of the education for anyone who wanted to take part in the life of the feudal courts, and the ability to quote these songs appropriately was considered necessary for polite discourse. In the *Analects* Confucius admonished, "If you don't know the *Book of Songs*, you will have no way to speak well." Envoys sent from one court to another and philosophers frequently quoted the *Book of Songs* in their speeches, both to prove points and to *hsing*, that is, to "stir" the listeners to sympathy with their point of view.

Before the Ch'in dynasty the *Book of Songs* had already acquired great authority, and because it was one of the central texts of Confucian learning the *Book of Songs* was ordered burned by the first Ch'in emperor, who wanted to destroy traditional values and replace them with his own utilitarian statism. But with the founding of the Han dynasty, the *Book of Songs* was reconstructed from memory and was reinterpreted to satisfy the interests of Han scholars. More than any other moment in the tradition, the Han reinterpretation of the *Book of Songs* established the importance of poetry in Chinese civilization.

According to the Han scholars one could find the moral history of the Chou dynasty in the *Book of Songs;* it was a kind of "interior history." The history embodied in the *Book of Songs* did not tell of historical events, but rather gave the reader a real sense of what it was like then, as seen through the responses of the individual authors of the poems. By reading the poems of the *Book of Songs* the later reader was supposed to be able to see the world through the mind and eyes of people of an earlier era. Poetry was not a craft or an art, but rather an involuntary expression of strong feeling bound up with the particular moment in history and society when it was produced.

This Han interpretation was codified in the Great Preface to the *Book of Songs*, which became the orthodox definition of poetry for the rest of the history of traditional China:

> The poem is that to which what is intensely on one's mind goes. In the mind it is the intensity of intent; coming out in language it is a poem.
>
> Emotions are stirred within and take on form in words. If words alone are inadequate, we speak it out in sighs. If sighing is inadequate, we sing it.

If singing it is inadequate, unconsciously our hands sway to it and our feet dance it out.

The emotions emerge in sounds; when those sounds have patterning, they are called "tones." The tones of a well-managed age are at rest and happy: its government is balanced. The tones of an age of turmoil are bitter and full of anger: its government is perverse. The tones of a ruined state are filled with lament and brooding: its people are in difficulty.

Although the Han interpretation is a general statement open to a wide latitude of interpretation, it provides guidelines that shaped the development of future poetry. First, poetry is conceived not as an activity practiced by poets but as a general human activity, something that "happens to" people when they experience feelings of a certain intensity. It differs from ordinary language not absolutely but by degree. Poetry comes forth naturally; it cannot be helped. And the good reader can see in such poetry both the state of mind of the writer and the circumstances of the world in which that writer found himself.

The Confucian scholars, whose interpretive traditions lay behind the formation of the Great Preface, were primarily interested in moral history, the ways in which the moral climate of a particular age would manifest itself in writing. Thus, a poem like "There is a dead doe in the wilds," quoted earlier, would be taken to show the decline of courtship and marriage customs that accompanied the political decline of the Chou. Although the particular interpretation made by these early Confucian commentators may now seem somewhat farfetched, the principle behind such interpretation remains valid and is, in fact, the principle that sustains much Marxist and historicist interpretation in the West: the social and political conditions of an age cannot but appear in poetry.

Confucian interest in moral history helped to shape one strain in the Chinese poetic tradition, namely, where poets write with the purpose of exposing social abuses. By making the evils of such abuses emotionally vivid through their poetry, these poets hope to encourage the ruling powers to correct them. The T'ang poet Po Chü-i (772–846) has several series of such poems, which have perhaps been more often praised in this tradition than read. The following song, "The Old Charcoal Seller," is directed against the practice in which the emperor's agents requisitioned any goods for use in the palace, setting their own prices.

An old charcoal seller
Who cut the wood and burned it to charcoal
   in the South Mountains,
From the smoke his face has turned the color of ash,
The locks of his hair are graying,
   his fingers all black.
When he sells his charcoal, what does he use
   his money for?—



Clothes for his body, food for his belly.
Though the clothes he now wears are terribly thin,
He worries about the charcoal's price
   and wants the weather cold.
Last night outside the city a foot of snow fell,
And at dawn his charcoal cart
   crunched through the icy ruts.
His ox was worn out, the man was hungry,
   and the sun was already high,
When he stopped the cart in the slush
   outside of the market's south gate.
Two riders come prancing toward him,
   he wonders who they are—
A palace eunuch officer
   with his white-robed servant boy;
In his hand he holds an edict
   which he reads to the man out loud,
Then turns the carriage and shouts at the ox,
   dragging it northward to the palace.
In that carriage the charcoal was more than a
   thousand pounds,
But the palace official who drives it away
   doesn't care at all.
A half a bolt of red gauze, a yard of fine silk
Have been tied upon the ox's head,
   payment for his charcoal.

The imperial government used silk as a medium of exchange, but the price set by the palace eunuch would only buy the old man five or ten pounds of rice, hardly enough to see him through the winter.

The impulse to discover social circumstances behind a poem occurs not only in poems like "The Old Charcoal Seller" but also in pieces that permit such interpretation less directly. The following piece is from a collection of poems called the "Nineteen Old Poems," probably from the early second century A.D. A social interpretation would see in it a sense of despair owing to the decline in Eastern Han society rather than a sense of despair about the universal human situation.

Those who have gone seem more remote each day,
The newly come each day seem more like kin.
I go out the gates, gaze straight ahead,
And see only the mounds of tombs.
Ancient graves have been plowed into fields,
Their cypress and pines cut down for fuel.
Sad winds roar through white willows
Their moaning brings grief too much to bear.
I long to return to my village home,
But about to go, no road takes me there.

The Great Preface may have encouraged such political and social interpretation, but its implications were much broader than political poetry. If poetry revealed a human state of mind, it not only implicated the political and social circumstances in which the person found himself but also revealed the nature of the person.

Perhaps the first poet to make full use of poetry as a means to articulate the apolitical dimensions of personality was T'ao Ch'ien (365–427). In T'ao Ch'ien's age, as in most of Chinese civilization, an educated man found full justification only in service to the state and society. However, there were many intellectuals who sought fulfillment in other, private goals, and the poetry and prose of such individuals is more widely read today than the writings of men who chose the regular course of state service. The fact that these individualists wrote more voluminously and persuasively cannot be taken as a sign that the age was dominated by individualism; rather, the decision to reject state service created a greater need for the poet to offer self-explanation and self-justification.

T'ao Ch'ien held office briefly, then made the radical decision to give up his post and return to his farm to spend the rest of his life as a farmer. Considering the dangerous political circumstances of the age in which he lived, this may have been a wise decision, but it was not an easy one. He used his poetry as a means to justify his choice, both to himself and others. T'ao's poetry became a kind of poetic autobiography and as such was an important stage in the development of the concept of poetry as a means to make the self known. In the following poem, the first in a series of five entitled "Returning to My Gardens and Fields," T'ao gives the essential narrative of alienation followed by return to his true nature.

Since youth I felt no sympathy for common things,
By nature I loved the mountains and hills.
But I made a mistake, fell into the world's net,
And once gone, remained there thirty years.
The caged bird yearns for its former forest,
Fish in a pond long for their native deeps.
I cleared wasteland by the edge of the southern wilds,
And to keep my simplicity went back to my gardens and fields.
A square plot, ten acres or so,
A thatched cottage of eight or nine rooms.
Elm and willow shade the rear eaves,
Peach trees and plums form rows before my hall.
Faint in the distance are villages
From which coils of smoke wind upward;
Dogs bark deep in the lanes,
Cocks crow from the tips of the mulberry.
No dust and dirt mix in my yard,
My empty chambers give ample peace.
Long I have been caught in a cage,
And now again I return to the nature of things.



Such life choices do not inherently require writing in poetry. Poetry is the means that gives such choices value, that makes them "public" (even though T'ao Ch'ien would claim that both the choices and poems were private). By writing again and again about his choice to retire to his farm, T'ao Ch'ien creates for himself a myth of the "natural life," which he sets against the more commonly accepted values of state service.

The poetry of the T'ang dynasty set the model for poetry in traditional China for the next thousand years. The great poets of the eighth and ninth centuries remained the most powerful figures for later ages, reminders of how successful poetry could be in embodying a human personality. In the latter part of the seventh century the Empress Wu introduced the composition of poetry into the civil service examination, which served as a means to recruit government officials from outside the aristocratic circles that surrounded the court. At about the same time the composition of poetry became a pervasive practice among the educated. Previously, poetry had been the practice of the few, of courtiers and eccentrics like T'ao Ch'ien. But beginning in the eighth century Chinese poetry began to realize its ancient promise that it be a means for anyone to "speak what was on the mind intensely."

In the T'ang, poetry was often more an activity than a literary "thing"; it was something an educated person was called on to do in certain circumstances. Some of the occasions for poetry were highly formalized. A person who was invited to a party would be expected to produce a poem in the same way that someone in the modern world is expected to play a parlor game the host might choose. One consequence of such uses of poetry was a vast quantity of second- and third-rate poetry. The pleasures of such poetry for the host and other guests were modest: the celebration of that moment, a fine turn of phrase, the way in which someone they knew expressed himself. These modest pleasures hold little allure for readers a thousand years later. However, some of the greatest poems of the dynasty can be found within that vast corpus of occasional poetry.

Partings and parting banquets were another important occasion for poetry. The friends and associates of the person leaving would often accompany the traveler a small distance on the journey. Then they would stop, set up a feast, and drink until late in the night. The next morning the bleary-eyed traveler would begin the serious part of the journey. This activity called for the composition of poems that would often be written out in a scroll and presented to the traveler on his final departure.

To drop in on a friend for a visit or, having dropped in, to find the person not at home were occasions that called for poems. Like banquet poems and other kinds of occasional poetry, such poetic "house gifts" might be modest verse, but they might also rise to the level of great art. "Visiting the Recluse on Mount Tai-t'ien and Not Finding Him In" is a famous poem by Li Po (701–762):

A dog barks amid the sound of waters,
Peach blossoms dark and heavy with dew.
Where trees are thickest I sometimes see a deer,
Noon in the ravine, but I hear no bell.
Bamboo of wilderness split through blue haze,
A cascade in flight, hung from an emerald peak.
No one knows where you've gone—
But I linger, disappointed, among these few pines.

It is worth our while to linger a while with this poem, to consider both how it functioned as a social act and how it transcended that immediate social purpose to become one of Li Po's best-known poems. On one level, the level most Western readers can see directly, Li Po is simply describing the scene around the recluse's dwelling and politely stating his disappointment that the man was not at home. But to be a good reader of the poem and of Li Po, to be the *chih-yin*, requires a special kind of attention on our part: we must follow the movement of Li Po's perception, and in that movement we must understand where the poet is and what he cares about. Learning to be a good reader of Chinese poetry is an art as fine as being a good poet.

Some of the things necessary to understand the poem are "lore." The good reader would associate peach blossoms with the story of "Peach Blossom Spring," in which a fisherman followed a trail of peach blossoms deep into the mountains where he found a village that had remained cut off from the outside world for centuries; the reader would know that Buddhist monasteries, located deep in the mountains, would ring the monastery bell at noon; and the reader would know that the pine was the emblem of moral integrity and the solitary life. But apart from these bits of lore, the art of reading requires only an intuitive sense of the way in which a description implies a particular "stance" and state of mind on the part of the person giving the description. If we learn this art of reading, we can easily understand why this poem was an appropriate "house gift" on this particular occasion, and why it became a very famous poem for future generations; we can also begin to see something of the immense appeal T'ang poetry held and still holds for Chinese readers.

The opening, "A dog barks amid the sound of waters," is a bold juxtaposition of sounds. The good reader knows at once that Li Po has been traveling through the mountains to find the recluse, hearing nothing but the sound of rushing waters. The intrusion of the dog's barking is a sign to the traveler of a human presence in the landscape; at the same time, to the person living hidden in the mountains, the barking announces the arrival of someone from the outside world. But beyond revealing the visitor to the recluse and the closeness of the recluse's dwelling to the visitor, this juxtaposition of sounds—the flowing waters and



the dog's barking—is a structure of abrupt intrusion, the sensuous counterpart of the poet's intrusion into the quiet world of the recluse.

To notice the peach blossoms is an allusion to the story of "Peach Blossom Spring," explained earlier. As the dog's barking tells the poet that he has finally reached the dwelling of the recluse, the peach blossoms heavy with dew reveal to us how the poet knew the way there. We smile. The heavy peach blossoms fall into the water (whose sounds the poet heard in the first line) and are carried by the current down the mountain, forming a trail for an outsider to follow to reach the home of someone hiding away in the mountains.

The poem is a search; the poet is looking for someone who is "hidden away" but is only finding elusive traces of the recluse's presence, traces half appearing in the landscape. In the thickest part of the forest a deer briefly appears, a creature whose wariness of humans is like the wariness of the recluse toward outsiders. For Li Po, looking intently to find the man, that movement might have been him. But the very fact that the deer would let itself be seen is evidence that the recluse has been here: in this place the shy animal has little to fear from a human. Like the barking of the dog, its appearance is another mark that the recluse is nearby—somewhere.

The water rushing down the mountain forms a ravine, along which the poet climbs. The steep sides and the thick trees growing along them keep the ravine in shade through the morning and afternoon. There is only one moment of full light, at noon when the sun is directly overhead. As the poet climbs through the shadows and approaches the home of the recluse, suddenly the sun breaks into the ravine. He stops and listens, knowing that in a place as remote as this one there might be a monastery, whose presence he can know by the sound of the noontime bell, just as he knew the presence of the recluse by the sound of the dog's bark intruding on the sound of the waters. However, there is only silence; and in that silence he realizes just how far into the wilderness he has come.

The next two lines are very beautiful, fine examples of the T'ang art of the couplet and of the way in which the description of the natural world is a mirror for human concerns. He sees a blue haze, and within that haze are tall straight stalks of bamboo, green and barely defined against the background of mist. After the intrusive barking of the dog, which let the poet know how close he was to the recluse and let the recluse know an outsider had come, everything seems to elude Li Po: he looks intently for something or someone; a shape half appears, then recedes—a deer, the bamboo in haze. Then that solid vertical figure of bamboo in the fluid haze becomes the vertical figure of the fluid waterfall, set against the solid background of the cliff. This waterfall becomes the "sound of waters" that carries the peach blossoms down into the mortal world.

In the last couplet the poet reaches the recluse's dwelling (which fortunately has a servant present to tell him that his master is not there). All the figures that half appeared, then disappeared, are gone; what remains is only a stand of pine trees where the poet leans, disappointed at not finding the recluse. Here a bit of lore is necessary. Li Po and his readers all know that the pine tree is the emblem of the recluse. Li Po has found the recluse in finding the surroundings that make the recluse what he is. Finding the person is unnecessary. Like the sounds of the mountain landscape when the dog is not barking at an intruder, the recluse has merged perfectly with nature, has disappeared into it. Li Po pretends to be a "worldly" person who does not recognize that he has truly found the recluse by finding his surroundings.

Ch'iu Wei, a contemporary of Li Po, wrote a poem on a similar subject; Ch'iu Wei climbs the mountain to the dwelling of the recluse, discovers that the man is not at home, and at the end of the poem states the principle more obviously than Li Po:

Though we didn't assume the roles of guest and host,
I have found the pure truth of your life here:
My impulse finished, I go back down the mountain—
Why should I have to wait for your return.

On one level Li Po has written a polite occasional poem, praising the man for the beauty of his home in the wilderness and the perfect life he has found there. It is the sort of poem one is supposed to write when paying an unexpected visit on a friend and not finding him at home. On another level it is a deeper poem about human beings and nature. On this level Li Po's poem goes beyond its use in a social occasion to become a very famous work that has appealed to readers for a thousand years.

Occasional poetry was an important form of participation in the social world; it was the most common context for writing poetry. It was not, however, the only kind of poetry. As in Western poetry, there were poems on general topics; and although poets still preferred concrete occasions for composition, those occasions did not have to be social ones. In Li Po's poem, for the sake of a compliment he assumes the role of a worldly intruder into the pure world of the recluse. Elsewhere, in "Question and Answer in the Mountains," he assumes the role of the recluse who rejects the common world.

You ask me why I choose
  to lodge in emerald hills;
I laugh and do not answer you,
  my heart is calm and still.
Peach blossoms in flowing water
  disappear into the distance:
There is another universe
  apart from the human world.



Together with Li Po, Tu Fu (712–770) is considered the greatest poet of traditional China. Tu Fu was caught in the middle of the great rebellion of the northeastern armies under the leadership of their general An Lu-shan. His captivity behind rebel lines, his escape to the loyalist court, and his later wanderings through the western provinces of the crumbling T'ang state made him a witness to great political events; in that role he fulfilled perfectly the definition of poetry given in the Great Preface of the *Book of Songs:* he unified the personal and the public aspects of the age. Many of his poems comment directly on battles and imperial policy; but toward the end of his life, traveling down the Yangtze River, he wrote some of his finest work, integrating private experience with the T'ang vision of the universal order. The following poem, "Spending the Night in a Tower by the River," is from this period.

The color of darkness extends on the mountain paths,
As I lodge by the river gate, high in a study,
A thin cloud spends the night on cliff's edge,
The lonely moon topples in the wave.
Storks and cranes fly calmly one after another,
Wild dogs and wolves howl over their prey.
I cannot sleep for worry over battles—
I have no strength to right the universe.

As in Li Po's poem, description here is the movement of Tu Fu's attention, first watching the darkness as it rises up the paths through the mountains (when the sun sets, the mountaintops catch the last light, so darkness seems to rise "up" the mountain). Tu Fu is in K'uei-chou, built on a steep mountainside that slopes down to the Yangtze River. High in the tower by the river, he feels he is clinging to the very edge of the land; then looking out, he sees his counterpart in the cloud, hanging motionless on the cliff's edge, as if about to fall into the river. That precarious position directs his attention to something falling; he looks down into the river and there sees the moonlight tossed about in the turbulent waters, as if the moon itself had fallen. Darkness and danger seem to surround him.

Hanging at the edge of things, there are two possibilities, falling to destruction or flying free, the actual movement of the cloud that seems so precariously balanced on the cliff. Poems like this one by Tu Fu are built of parallel images and oppositions: every shape has counterparts and contrasts. The form of the cloud on the point of flight finds a parallel in the image of cranes and storks, birds associated with recluses and immortals, moving easily through the air. Below the cranes and storks in the darkness Tu Fu hears "wild dogs and wolves," associated with violent men, howling over some victim taken in the darkness. Images of fear and hope of escape surround him in his precarious perch. The sleeplessness follows naturally from these images but also from the sense of his own powerlessness; he has "no strength to right the universe."

The poem is a private statement, yet at the end it raises a public value, if only to confess the impossibility of realizing that value: Tu Fu would "right the universe" if he could; he cannot.

Rather than an art that is separate from the common world in which we live, Chinese poetry tried to be part of life, giving words to complex feelings. Even in a private poem like Tu Fu's, poetry was a means to make a public statement, even if the statement would have to take the place of action. The great poets are not figures apart but remain some of the most memorable figures in Chinese civilization: personalities like T'ao Ch'ien, Li Po, and Tu Fu remain a living part of that community across time.

THIRTEEN

# The Distinctive Art of Chinese Fiction

*Paul S. Ropp*

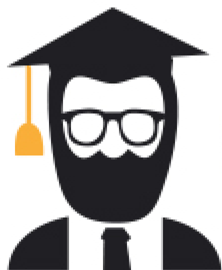
Storytelling in China probably began in the cave, and it continues to flourish in the late twentieth century. For a civilization as old and continuous as China's, a complete history of fiction would fill many books. My purpose in this chapter is more modest: to suggest the uses and pleasures of reading Chinese fiction in English translation, to give a sense of the distinctive qualities of fiction (especially vernacular fiction) in China as compared with Western fiction, and to review some of the highlights of the Chinese tradition.

There are many ways to try to understand a civilization. No one way is necessarily superior to the others, but certainly one of the most enjoyable ways to explore the riches of Chinese civilization is through its fiction. As a very popular art form in China, fiction can tell us a great deal about the beliefs, values, and customs of ordinary people. In describing the details of daily life Chinese storytellers from at least the fifth century A.D. onward have given us our most extensive sources on the actual texture of Chinese life, what Lionel Trilling once called the "hum and buzz of implication" that we take for granted in our own lives but that gets lost in most formal or official records from the past.

Fiction naturally invites analysis from many different perspectives.[1]

Although I have not always been able to implement their suggestions, I am very grateful to the following people for very helpful criticisms of earlier drafts of this chapter: Sunhee Kim Gertz, C. T. Hsia, David L. Rolston, Yaohua Shi, Virginia Vaughan, and Judith Zeitlin.

1. Four useful introductory works illustrating different approaches to the study of fiction are René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3d ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956); Wilbur Scott, ed., *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1962); Elizabeth Burns and Tom Burns, eds., *Sociology of Literature and Drama* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); and Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).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