

Background
Essay

Writing as a Means to Express and Cultivate the Self

Kelly Ann Long

The written word—whether a single character, a poem, or a prose essay—played a key role in Chinese history and in the self-expression of the cultured individual. China’s writing system extends back thousands of years to the beginnings of Shang civilization in the seventeenth century B.C.E., providing cultural continuity and links to the past. The appreciation and execution of poetry and calligraphy, and later painting, became the means by which the Chinese have understood and expressed themselves as individuals and as members of a society.

Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) shaped the standards and texts that formed the foundation of Chinese scholarship, education, and artistic aspiration for centuries. His writings described the model ruler, a moral man who demonstrated proper behavior (*li*) and relationships with others (*jen*) and who thereby helped to create an orderly and good society. Confucius thought that every man should cultivate his own talents and seek to fulfill his potential by communing with others through the arts. By reading, writing, and practicing the arts, the superior man could elevate himself and give rise to virtuous self-expression.

Over time Confucian classics became the basis of the civil service examination system, which changed through the dynasties but provided a coherent fabric to Chinese life for centuries. These texts connected the scholar to his intellectual ancestors. Those who succeeded in the arduous civil exams were rewarded with positions in government. Yet, along with the study of policy and governmental tracts, these exams emphasized literary skills.

Years of education and examinations marked the journey to becoming a scholar-official. Typically only sons received formal education, which began at a very early age. A young boy practiced brushstrokes in a Confucian saying by copying over examples. Over time the student memorized thousands of characters in long passages from the classics. In addition he read commentaries upon the classics and modeled his own essays and poems upon them. This curriculum accomplished much more than mere literacy—it forged a moral rationale and instilled a shared set of personal values among scholar-officials.

Because training in the literary arts comprised such a large portion of the required learning, scholar-officials were often poets and gifted artists as well. It is no surprise that these educated elite, or *literati* as they were called,

gathered to appreciate the arts and one another's intellect. They formed communities of friends and cultivated their best inner character by sharing conversation, poetry, and art. In their writing the literati alluded to ancient sages, places, and poems to express themselves and the realities of their circumstances, making the past integral to their self-cultivation.

Self-Cultivation Through Poetry

Poetry was considered the height of literary accomplishment for the Chinese scholar. From the time of Confucius, educated Chinese referenced, collected, and wrote poetry, embracing it as a crucial part of their lives.

Poetic forms differed through time and with regard to place. The earliest collection of poems, compiled around the sixth century B.C.E., is the *Shi Jing*, or the Book of Songs. These poetic forms were made of four-word verses and included folk songs as well as dynastic and court poems. Poetic forms continued to develop, and during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), *fu*, or prose poems, emerged. After the fall of the Han, the *shi* form, characterized by the repetition of the grammatical structure to express similar ideas, evolved from the four-word verse of the *Shi Jing*. This became one of the most recognizable and practiced styles of Chinese poetry. Poetic styles continued to evolve during the Tang dynasty (618–907 C.E.), often regarded as China's golden age of poetry. (See the *Exemplars of the Beautiful and the Refined in Tang Poetry* at the beginning of this section.) Many of the best-loved poets of China lived during this period, and new poetic styles emerged. During this time the literati were joined by emperors, Daoist hermits, Buddhist monks, and court ladies in revering and writing poetry. Moreover, the arts of painting, music, and poetry were integrated to create some of China's finest examples of artistic self-expression.

Tang poems evoke the mood, scene, and spirit of nature. Beautiful, natural surroundings were thought to produce people of strong character. A good Confucian, however, was obligated to serve in government and could not live a secluded life, wandering in nature. Yet he nourished his spirit by taking imaginary journeys through landscape paintings or descriptive poems. Many Tang poems describe brief moments of intense feeling caused by the sight of natural beauty. As in Chinese painting, where blank space has value, in Chinese poetry the unspoken also speaks. While the subject is often unstated in Chinese poetry, the poet infuses nature with a personality as a means of expressing his inner emotions, attributing them to the scene or thing being described.

An unparalleled master of these arts was Wang Wei (701–761 C.E.), whose *monochrome* landscapes are as well known and revered as his poems. Wang Wei was an official, yet it is not the record of his official acts but rather his poetry and painting that have left a lasting influence on China.

Monochrome
A painting, drawing, or
photograph in a single color.

His style of landscape painting became a model for literati painters for over four hundred years. He believed that handwriting and painting should offer evidence not of one's skill with the brush but of one's quality as a person. He used choice expressions to create images within his poems, just as he used a few strokes of the brush to create his landscape paintings. A follower of Buddhism, his poems are said to evoke the sense of quiet, solitude, emptiness, and freedom from desire that correspond to Buddhist *doctrine*. His descriptive poems create strong pictorial effects, and he often depicted himself within scenes of nature. For example, the poet places himself in the poem "Bamboo Lodge."

Doctrine

A rule or idea that is part of a system of belief.

I sit alone in the dark bamboo grove,
Playing the *zither* and whistling long.
In this deep wood no one would know—
Only bright moon comes to shine.¹

Zither

A stringed instrument with 30 to 40 strings over a piece of wood that is played horizontally with a pick.

A contemporary of Wang Wei, Li Bo (701–762 C.E.), wrote from a Daoist perspective, expressing his own thoughts and emotions as well as love of nature. His works celebrated friendship, nature, and solitude. He also wrote poems praising the qualities and expressing the laments of women he met during his travels. His style is bold, spontaneous, and original. One, "The Beautiful Woman of Yang Shang," is included in *Exemplars of the Beautiful and the Refined in Tang Poetry*.

From a swift horse prancing proudly through fallen petals,
He brushes his whip against a cloud-covered chariot.
A lovely woman, smiling, raises the pearl curtain—
"My home is there," she says, pointing off at a red tower.²

Li Bo's contemporary, Du Fu (712–776 C.E.), engaged in the world, using his talents to work for its betterment. Clearly the Confucian moralist, his well-regulated poems express concern, criticize social wrongs, rail against the senselessness of war, and voice compassion for the poor. He drew upon nature to evoke emotions as well as to comment indirectly upon events in his world. He is considered a social historian because his poems describe changes he personally experienced during a period of deterioration and war. Concerned with inequity, even though he was part of the scholar-official class, he was a true humanitarian in his compassion for his fellow man. In this way he exemplified the Confucian ideal of the cultivated man who

1. Wang Wei, translated by Liu, Wu-chi, *An Introduction to Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 72

2. Translation by Professor Stephen Durrant.

serves to better society. His poetry reveals these aspects of his character.

Vermilion

A bright reddish orange color.

Silk that was bestowed at the *vermilion* court
Came originally from some poor shivering women;
Their husbands were whipped and flogged
So that it could be *levied* as a tribute to the imperial city.

Levied

Something that is required by
an authority, as taxes are
required by the government.

Inside the vermilion gate wine and meat are stinking;
On the roadside lie the bones of people frozen to death.³

Poetic forms continued to develop in the dynasties following the Tang. The form known as the *ci* was introduced during the Tang and was perfected and popularized during the Song dynasty (960–1279). Called “long and short verse” to describe its lines of varying length, it uses colloquial expressions and was originally written to be sung to the melody of popular tunes.

One of China’s best known female poets, Li Qingchao (1081–1141 C.E.) lived during the Song dynasty. She wrote volumes of poems and essays in which she celebrated the joys of life and expressed intensely personal emotions about separation from her husband. Her poems are unsurpassed in revealing the intimacy, delicacy, and immediacy of feeling evoked by life events.

Exceptional forms of poetry continued to emerge during the Yuan (1279–1368 C.E.), Ming (1368–1644 C.E.), and Qing (1644–1911 C.E.) dynasties, but the twentieth century witnessed a break with tradition. The exam system was abolished, and in the wake of the May 4th, 1919, student protests against provisions of the Treaty of Versailles granting Chinese territory to Japan, the *baihua wen* (clear speech, or vernacular) movement replaced the classical Chinese *wenyan wen* forms of writing. Regional dialects emerged in novels and short stories, many influenced by Western literary forms and topics. Poetry remained an important form of self-expression. As the communist movement spread across the mainland, socialist realism in the arts and literature became standard. The Maoist genre (*Mao wenti*) encouraged rigid, stock phrases and political tracts. Mao himself was an acclaimed poet, continuing the tradition of the politician-poet. A variety of movements emerged since his death. After the Open Policy of 1978, “scar literature” documented the Cultural Revolution, while New Realism focused on contemporary problems. The Misty Poetry groups used private imagery to make veiled political references. Nevertheless, links to the past continue. Poets such as Bei Dao, one of the most popular figures of the Misty Poetry group, still forms connections to the past. He writes poems with strong, pic-

3. Du Fu, “My Trip from the Capital to Feng-hsien,” Translated by Wu-chi Liu, *An Introduction to Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p.82

tographic qualities and thus continues the traditions of self-expression and cultivation through poetry.

Kelly Ann Long was a high school teacher for 18 years. She received her Ph.D. in 1998 from University of Colorado and is now an Assistant Professor at Colorado State University.

Selected sources and suggested further readings:

Liu, Wu-chi. *An Introduction to Chinese Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966.

Owens, Stephen. *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Sullivan, Michael. *The Arts of China, 3 d ed.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Whincup, Greg. *The Heart of Chinese Poetry*. New York: Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1987.