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, charac-
terized 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 her-
mits, 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, nat-
ural 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.”

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

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

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². Translation by Professor Stephen Durrant.
serves to better society. His poetry reveals these aspects of his character.

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.

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. He 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-

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

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Selected sources and suggested further readings:

