

CHINESE POETRY AND ITS POPULAR SOURCES

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[In 1953, the UNESCO Committee of Experts on Intercultural Relations, with Dr. Mei Yi-Chi as its Chinese representative, published my essay "Cultural Essence of Chinese Literature" in a symposium volume under the title *Interrelations of Cultures*. The essentials of the following article, presented in an address at the Biennales Internationales de Poesie, 1956, are a development and elaboration of certain ideas in the earlier essay. The significance of the subject for comparative cultural studies, and its relevancy to contemporary poetic criticism, have since engaged much of my attention. I am now happy to work out the article in its present form, and dedicate it to Dr. Mei on his 70th birthday.]

As an approach to our subject, let us first examine two generalizations regarding Chinese poetry. Although, like most generalizations on things Chinese, they may seem one-sided or even paradoxical, they can perhaps conveniently lead us to the heart of the matter in our present inquiry. One such generalization assumes that China is a nation of poets; the other, that in China poetry has served as a "secular religion". To these we may add a third: namely, that readers of Chinese poetry, whether in the original or in translation, often find it a *tour de force* in which the homely and earthy are fused with the highly sophisticated and the picturesque.

The first observation, that China is a nation of poets is, if taken literally, certainly a gross exaggeration. It may nevertheless have some basis in truth, if we consider the generally noted fact that aesthetic feeling has permeated the growth and development of Chinese civilization. Under the more flourishing Chinese dynasties, an important part of the civil service examination consisted of poetic contests. Governors of provinces, cabinet ministers and other policy makers were chosen mainly for their poetic gift. It was as if the poet, to paraphrase Shelley, was the *acknowledged* "legislator of mankind". Chinese everyday life, at least up to the present century, before the impact of the modern age had dislocated the older cultural pattern, did seem to produce poetry with greater ease. The chance meet-

ings or partings of friends, banquets and festivities, small domestic concerns, a short trip away from home all found easy and spontaneous expressions in Chinese poetry, not to mention more spectacular events, magnificent scenery, the emotions of love, or reflections on life and death. Chinese poetry was, in this sense, an everyday ritual, performed on the spur of the moment in connection with any human relationship.

This gives us a clue to the meaning of the second paradoxical observation, that Chinese poetry is a "secular religion". Chinese religious life is most difficult to describe, because of the conspicuous lack, if not total absence, of any effective, formal ecclesiastical organization. We in the West have been perhaps too accustomed to thinking of religion in terms of theology, and of doctrines preached in church. And, if I am not mistaken, religion is sometimes understood in terms of Christianity only. Yet we know that the word religion has a much less formal, a much broader, basic and primary meaning. Certain great ancient thinkers, in their larger vision or deep faith, seem to have grasped this primary meaning. Certain modern social scientists, also, in search of the more universal essence of religion have, in the light of their wider knowledge of man and his society, accepted the same primary meaning of the word. And we shall see that the fundamental implications of this primary meaning of the word "religion" thus redefined, can be applied, almost perfectly, to the traditional place and function of poetry in China.

Cicero, the great Roman master of words, derived the word "religion" from *religere*, meaning to act meticulously by means of repeated efforts. Lactantius, sometimes called the "Christian Cicero", derived the word from *religare*, meaning "to bind together". Thus, some sociologists today would see in the word "religion" the fundamental meaning of human observances recurring so as to form certain outward patterns of social behavior, based on an inner awareness of a common bond. This, in a way, is how poetry used to function in Chinese society, informally, in lieu of formalized religion. It is true that in a stricter Western sense, religion must contain supernatural belief, other-worldly aspirations, and theistic worship. Chinese poetry, if it is often, though certainly not always, without these contents, embodies nevertheless cultivated patterns of social behavior, repeatedly performed, to satisfy men's need for communicating their inner realizations of the higher meanings and more exalted moments of their everyday earthly life. Thus poetry emancipates men, each from his narrow self, and binds them together on a higher level of being. In the absence of any organized ecclesiastical authority, Chinese poetry, with the other arts adjoined to it, has in its social function indeed become almost the sole institution whereby man's spirituality has been nurtured and expressed, as it might have been in religion. It has, therefore, often been noted by

thoughtful minds that in poetry and the arts the Chinese religious instinct, or genius, finds its truest expression.

But while Chinese poetry fulfills this majestic office, unrestricted by precepts, dogma and definite objects of supernatural worship, it includes in its scope the lowly everyday realities as well as the highest aspirations, wonder and revelation. In fact we would say, it is precisely by investing all human affairs, however trivial and humdrum, with feelings of wonder and awe, that Chinese poetry, religious in its capacity but secular in its concern, achieves its special quality: a quality born of everyday things spiritualized, so to speak, and universal visions so focused as to shine forth in all their concrete intimate details. Hence our last observation with regard to it, as a *tour de force* of poetic fusion.

These observations have led us to, or perhaps already partly suggest, our central thesis: the unique way in which Chinese poetry is at one with its popular sources rather than merely utilizing them. We stress this point of interest with particular reference to contemporary Western poetic trends. The so-called "folk cult" advocated in literary and poetic theories, the idealization of the "noble savage", and the urge toward "rebarbarization", I understand, have been rather recent in the West. They followed the violent social and intellectual upheavals that precipitated the Romantic movement. The general tenor of these advocations has been, one might say, the restoration of man to his original natural state, and the reinvigoration of his art with primitive *mana*. "Folk" sources have been widely sought, far from civilization-contaminated city life, becoming ever more remote, even right back to their roots in the aboriginal. "Folk" sources have been sought not only for renewed inspiration and for new materials, but also for fresh revelation. In current Western poetic theories the mytho-religious character of poetry has often been upheld and enhanced. All these phenomena have been recognized as a commentary on modern man's alienation from his world, and on the poet's zealous, earnest search for man's "at-homeness" on this earth. But the "home", so to speak, has thus far seemed to recede more and more. The result of the effort to conjure it up in poetry has often been an adventitious exoticism, and has constituted an escape rather than a true return. We are not calling attention to this as a contemporary failing in poetry, but rather as its contemporary predicament.

The efficacy of folk sources in Chinese poetry has been clearly recognized, and then taken for granted, throughout the past three thousand years. But it was hardly ever theorized or idealized, except perhaps for political purposes in ancient as well as in very recent times. So far as these sources concerned the Chinese poet himself, he was always at home with them, rooted as he was in the same soil with them. Throughout thirty centuries Chinese dynasties rose and fell. In broad

outlines, several political and cultural cycles, not self-containing, to be sure, but evolving out of one another, can be seen in continuous movements with a certain rhythm. The development of poetic cycles generally coincided with that of the political ones. After a period of peace and prosperity came disunion and collapse and the end of a political cycle. Then a new cycle was heralded by revolution, reunification and reconstruction, to achieve again social well-being and stability, until another end and a new beginning. Toward the end of each cycle, poetry became over-refined in technique, "decadent" in spirit and precious in style, characteristic of "fin de siècle". And in each new cycle the rehabilitation of poetry, or, in later periods, the creation of other genres such as drama and the novel, was achieved by turning to, and being invigorated by, the everlasting flow of the life-giving sources of folk literature as regards both substance and form. (For details, please see my "Cultural Essence of Chinese Literature", in *Interrelations of Cultures*, UNESCO, Paris, 1953.)

It would seem that these repeated processes in the development of Chinese poetry strongly confirm the theory of "rebarbarization". This may be so. Yet the connotative senses of this term would never occur to the Chinese poet or critic, far less the usage of the term itself. For him, the processes were natural. There was little feeling of the necessity to reach out for sources alien to himself or to his tradition; and even less inclination toward the "barbarian" condescended to, or the "noble savage" idealized. The Chinese poet was, as we have said, remaining "at home" on his own soil. The anonymous body of folk creation in poetry had, indeed, not only been cherished but venerated in his tradition. The ancient classic *Shih Ching* 詩經, or *Book of Odes*, accepted since Confucius not only as the fountainhead of poetry, but as the great model, is largely a collection of folk songs. So are the *Yueh Fu* 樂府, or *Music Repository Collections*, gathered by the Han imperial court many centuries later.

It is perhaps the continuing closeness of the Chinese poet's poetry to its folk origins, and the steadfast belief in the value of the ancient poetic classics sprung from this folk tradition, that have given even averagely representative Chinese poetry the quality of immediacy and refreshing sincerity. The refinement which distinguished the Chinese poet's work from that of folk creation lay, of course, in its individuation and hence its deepening of experience, its precision of diction, its purification of technique, and its enlargement of vision. But since the poet was never a "displaced person", and particularly since it was often everyday feelings, homely sentiments, intimately human themes, and nature's immediate aspects that were his poetic concern, his experiences could be very easily identified with those of the others, the folk as well as those of his own kind. His technique was directed

mainly to expressing and heightening these experiences. During periods of decadence, when these experiences and his own vision of them were colored by escapism, as in a "time of troubles" (to borrow historian Toynbee's phrase), or were adulterated by corrupting social influences, his technique would tend to become overwrought and empty and his diction merely florid. But with the beginning of each new cycle, the rediscovery of folk sources was, for him and his tradition, a true return, a happy re-encounter.

We have spoken of the rather curious, but not wholly unwarranted notion of Chinese poetry as a kind of "secular religion", both in its place and function, though without theology or dogma. It is as a religion in this rarefied form and purified function (religion in the sense derived from the words *religere* and *religare*), that Chinese poetry, concerning itself directly with man, gave him, in the phrase of the great psychologist William James, "the pungent sense of effective reality." The Chinese poet would not in his closeness to folk sources regard popular superstitions, magic and myth, with the same strange interest accorded them by the self-conscious Western man. He might even believe in some of them, as did the folk themselves, or he might dismiss them entirely in returning to other, more congenial folk activities having to do with their rustic life. I am aware that the word "myth" has today emerged with a new meaning. There have been recent attempts to redefine myth and set it up as an ideal, and to regard poetry in general as myth-making. (I have in mind the American critic Richard Chase, and others, harking back to the insights of the great Giambattista Vico.) In so far as this ideal of poetry as myth-making is valid, the Chinese poets were perhaps, all the time, unconsciously but successfully, practising it, with or without mythical materials. But this "myth", which the Chinese poets in their "secular religious" function were making so successfully, is "myth" only within the definition of Professor Mark Schorer (incidentally my colleague and friend at University of California at Berkeley). "A Myth" says Professor Schorer, in the *Kenyon Review* (Autumn, 1942), "is a large controlling image.....which gives philosophic meaning to the facts of ordinary life".

In the space of this short paper, we have been able to bring out only a few salient points with regard to some of the distinctive qualities of Chinese poetry, its peculiar social function, and its special relationship to its folk sources. These may, by parallel or contrast, add something to our perspective in our study of contemporary poetry. In discussing the folk sources of poetry, in a more fundamental sense, we cannot help touching upon the problems of religion. Speaking of Chinese poetry as a "secular religion", we are reminded of Matthew Arnold, who, disappointed with formal religion but paying homage to poetry, declared: "The

strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry". But we may also think of Mr. T. S. Eliot, who seems to us to have turned up the other side of the same coin, when he says in his essay on "Religion and Literature", "What I want is a literature which should be *unconsciously* Christian". (The word "unconsciously" is emphasized by Mr. Eliot himself.) If we believe with Matthew Arnold that "the strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry", then, conversely, perhaps the strongest part of poetry is its *unconscious* religious function, such as Chinese poetry, blessed by historical circumstances, has for long centuries possessed, and which bound up and integrated the Chinese poet with his nation and his people, and afforded him endless inspiration in the folk sources on his own soil.

In conclusion, we are aware that times and circumstances are today vastly different. With the feeling of "homelessness" so prevalent in the modern world, the modern poet's restless and sometimes wild search is inevitable. What he is looking for, in remote sources, for his poetry, and for the world, is seen by some as the creation of a new myth, by others as a new religion. And where modern civilization has altered China, the Chinese poet today may have to join his Western colleague in the new quest. But the quality of traditional Chinese poetry, continuously produced for millennia, will remain to be treasured, and should always serve our poetic studies instructively. The world today is a much greater one than the traditional Chinese poet could have conceived of. The contemporary quest will, we hope, result in a new great poetry commensurate with the greatness of this new world. But perhaps it is salutary to our spirit to remember still the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tze 老子, whom here we paraphrase:

Greatness means reaching for the far distance,

But to reach the farthest distance means to return.

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中國詩與民俗之因緣

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(提 要)

近日泛論中國詩，頗聳聽者，蓋可舉三說。一曰中國詩人之國也；二曰詩乃中國之一世間底宗教也；三曰瑰辭麗句不厭人生細事家常瑣故之表達也。茲三說者，各似浮誇，然細察亦非所持無故。本文於此三說加以校練，尋取中國詩於社會民俗中之根源。結論注重近世騰囂之詩與宗教問題。特舉十九世紀權威，英人阿諾德所云：“吾人今日宗教中之最有力部分，乃其不自覺的詩之成分；”並今世英詩界領導人物艾略忒所云：“吾所期望之文學應為不自覺而合耶教精神者。”合觀二論，與中國詩傳統中不自覺之廣義宗教作用，著於實際者，頗有閤合。廣義“宗教”之意義，亦尋繹字源及西洋古哲之索解，加以申論。而於今日大世界，新生活，中西詩人所共追求者，略致意焉。