

Defining Decadence in the Chinese Poetic Tradition

As has been indicated in the Introduction, the concept of decadent literature as a “falling away” from “previously recognized” conditions and standards of excellence is predicated upon a set of conventional presumptions about the nature of “canon”¹ in a literary tradition. The canon is the background against which decadent literature operates. Therefore, let us begin our discussion with the canonical concept of literature. Such a concept was formed very early in the Chinese tradition, and the single most important statement about the nature of poetry² is the one recorded in *Shang shu* 尚書 (*The book of historical documents*):

Poetry expresses one's will; song prolongs one's words; sounds correspond to melody; instruments accord with sounds; when the eight tones are all balanced and do not encroach upon one another, spirits and human beings will be in harmony.

詩言志，歌永言，聲依永，律和聲，八音克諧，無相奪倫，神人以和。³

Unlike Aristotle's mimetic theory, which locates poetry at an external source,⁴ this expressive theory defines poetry as a movement from the internal to the external. Its origin is unequivocally located in the poet's heart or mind (*xin* 心).⁵ It also establishes the important

role that poetry is expected to play in regulating human affairs, hence the close link between the quality of poetry and certain social conditions. This view of poetry is further elaborated by another key document, the Great Preface to *The Book of Songs* (詩大序):

Poetry is where one's will goes. In mind [or heart] it is will; coming out in language, it is poetry. The emotions are stirred within and take on form in words. When words alone are inadequate, we speak them out in sighs. When sighing is inadequate, we sing them. When singing them is inadequate, unconsciously our hands dance them and our feet tap them.

詩者，志之所之也，在心爲志，發言爲詩。情動於中而形於言，言之不足故嗟嘆之，嗟嘆之不足故永歌之，永歌之不足，不知手之舞之，足之蹈之也。⁶

The assumption is that poetry flows from one's inner response to an external stimulus. It is a "natural"—that is, automatic—product of the stimulus-response process. Poetry is conceived as a psychobiological need of the human being, essential for maintaining the balance and health of mind and body. Not only does this formulation imply that spontaneity and sincerity are the most essential qualities in poetry, since any response that is forced or faked is not natural and hence cannot bring about the desired therapeutic result (of physical or mental health). It also implicitly mandates the linguistic style best equipped to fulfill such a task. Only the most straightforward, the most transparent, verbal medium can articulate one's feelings and thoughts effectively and spontaneously unleash one's mental and physical tensions. The complete absence of any discussion on technical aspects of poetic production in this preface⁷ indicates that poetry is not viewed as a craft to be mechanically pursued. To the contrary, tinkering with and polishing the product can only betray insincerity on the part of the poet, impede the process of communication, and deny the *raison d'être* of poetry. But as we will see later, it is precisely with such tinkering and polishing that decadent poetry is associated.

This view echoes Confucius's distrust of sophisticated speech. A passage in the *Analects* records that when someone criticized one of his students as being "truly virtuous, but not ready with his tongue," Confucius defended him with the following words:

What is the good of being ready with tongue? They who argue in sophisticated speech only make themselves despised. I do not know whether he is virtuous, but why should he show readiness of the tongue?

焉用佞？禦人以口給，屢憎於人。不知其仁，焉用佞？⁸

Confucius seems to be suggesting that sophisticated speech is incompatible with a virtuous personality. Similarly, the Great Preface indicates that in poetry an artificial and intricate verbal medium obstructs rather than enhances the communication of heartfelt thoughts and emotions. That is, only a spontaneous verbal medium can express a spontaneous reaction.

In the previously quoted passage from *Shang shu* there is another element that enormously influenced the Chinese attitude toward poetry—the belief that poetry can and should play a role in maintaining harmony between humankind and spirits or nature. Later, when Chinese society had evolved from its primitive state, when the functions of gods and spirits had been replaced by civil government, this semireligious mandate to maintain a harmony between humankind and spirits was transformed into a political mandate: poetry must help government to administer its people. It must help society to maintain order. It must, as Confucius says, serve to “stimulate [the will] (*xing* 興), observe [social customs] (*guan* 觀), hold together [members in a community] (*qun* 群), and voice grievance [about social injustice] (*yuan* 怨).”⁹ The Great Preface misses no opportunity to elaborate this concept:

Feelings are expressed in sounds; when sounds form in pattern, it is music. The music of a peaceful world is leisurely and happy, its politics is in order; the music of a disordered world is full of grievance and anger, its politics is in chaos. The music of a defeated country is sad, and its people are in trouble. Therefore, to uphold what is just, to correct what is wrong, to move heaven and earth, to reach the gods and spirits, nothing comes close to poetry. This is why the ancient kings use it to regulate husband and wife, to establish filial piety among people, to make their morality honest, to make their customs beautiful, and to improve the milieu in society.

情發於聲，聲成文謂之音。治世之音安以樂，其政和；亂世之音怨以怒，其政乖；亡國之音哀以思，其民困。故正得失，動天地，感鬼神，莫近於詩。先王以是經夫婦，成孝敬，厚人倫，美教化，移風俗。¹⁰

Throughout history the consensus has been that the texts we have been considering so far lay the foundation of the canon in the Chinese literary tradition. Xu Shen 許慎 (30–124), the author of the first Chinese dictionary, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, takes poetry (*shi* 詩) and will (*zhi* 志) to be synonyms because “poetry is the will expressed in words”.¹¹ Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 refers to the statement that “poetry expresses one’s will” as “the founding principle of Chinese poetic theory.”¹² Stephen Owen regards the Great Preface to be:

the most authoritative statement on the nature and function of poetry in traditional China. Not only was it to be the beginning of every student’s study of the *The Book of Songs* from the Eastern Han through the Sung, its concerns and terminology became essential part of writing about poetry and learning about poetry. It was the one text on the nature of poetry that everyone knew from the end of Han on, and even when the Great Preface came under harsh attack in later ages, many positions in it remained almost universally accepted.¹³

Perhaps no one will dispute that any subsequent development in Chinese literature had to take into account of the two “recognized” conditions and standards of excellence advanced by these texts: (1) the spontaneity, sincerity, and naturalness of expression, and (2) “political correctness” of content. Together they constitute the cornerstone of Confucian poetic theory. However, in Confucius’s own or putative works we find some tensions that undermine this theory and its implied criteria.

It is clear that Confucius emphasizes the subject matter and practical function of poetry; for him poetry is an important means of achieving his social and political ideal. He once says that if one cannot use poetry in diplomatic missions—even though one could recite *The Book of Songs* in its entirety—there was no point in learning it.¹⁴ But in fact Confucius is never totally pragmatic, as evidenced by the tremendous emphasis he lays on the role and aesthetic appeal of ritual.

Ritual keeps social regulations from becoming tyrannical because it encourages people to act spontaneously and willingly. When filial piety becomes a ritual act, for instance, the son acts not only out of a sense of obligation and responsibility but also out of a sense of personal satisfaction, because the aesthetic elements of ritual transform the very act into artistic play.¹⁵ This is why Confucius expressed distaste for any “substance without form”: “When substance (*zhi* 質) overwhelms the form (*wen* 文, or pattern), it is vulgar; when form overwhelms substance, it is extravagant. Only when one can achieve a balance between form and substance can one become a gentleman.”¹⁶ Besides abhorring its vulgarity, Confucius also disliked the naked expression of content because it could never achieve effectively the goal it aims at. In another often cited remark he says “words without *wen* do not go very far.”¹⁷

These words in praise of embellished linguistic expression seem to contradict the condemnation of sophisticated speech uttered by a ready-tongued person; or at least the difference between embellished words and sophisticated speech is not obvious. Moreover, the balance between form and content that Confucius seems to advocate is a delicate one, because compared with content, form is of a much more unstable nature. One can try to establish authority over the content of writing by relating it to the statement of one’s intentions. In the Chinese tradition this endeavor carries enormous weight because of the *zhiren lunshi* 知人論世 exegetical habit that was implied in the canonical concept of poetry¹⁸ and elevated to a principle by Mencius. It stipulates specifically that to understand the meaning of a text, one must explore the author’s life and his time.¹⁹ But this is not easy to accomplish since one must work with impersonal linguistic signifiers that operate in a context extending far beyond the control of their user. Form, therefore, can easily elude the attempt at containment by its specific user and acquire a meaning that often undermines and even contradicts the author’s intentions.

This is exactly what happens to Confucius with regard to his view of poetry. The delicate equilibrium he sets up between the sociopolitical function of poetry as a sheer instrument of social and political purpose and its formal aesthetic appeal as the artistic expression of the rectifying political will can be upset. Because the canon of Chinese poetry is based essentially on the presumed but precarious balance between the two aspects of this tension, although different periods seem to

have emphasized one or the other,²⁰ it is highly unstable. As we shall see, any later developments in Chinese poetry or literature are inevitably attempts to redefine or redraw this subtle equilibrium. The moralists advocate the overriding importance of content and try to contain poetry as an instrument of their political agenda. Artistically minded writers, however, aim to give form a larger role in their literary production. The so-called decadent poetry in Chinese tradition is nothing but such an effort on the part of a group of poets to rethink and redefine the poet's relationship to this canon. And thus the emphasis on the aesthetic appeal of form can be seen as a self-conscious critique and reshaping of an orthodox principle.

The Great Preface sows other seeds of potential disruption of the Confucian canon that it upholds because it considers the process of decline as ineluctable. The poems in *The Book of Songs* were considered to be the ultimate examples of Chinese poetry, yet as the Great Preface would have it, even in these poems—said to have been selected by Confucius himself—such a process of decline had already begun:

When the kingly way declined rites and moral principles were abandoned; the government lost its power to instruct; the political structure of the states changed; the customs of the family were altered: at this point the mutated poems were written.

至於王道衰，禮義廢，政教失，國異政，家殊俗，而變風、變雅作矣。²¹

The decline of poetry, then, is seen as the necessary result of the decline of a political and social reality, because, in this view, poetry is inherently connected to the quality of society. Of course, when belief in the inherent connection between poetry and sociopolitical life is shattered in later ages, the basis for the belief in the decline of poetry is undermined as well.²² Zhu Ziqing points out that the word *bian* 變 (to change, changed, or “mutated” as in Owen's rendering), can have two very different connotations, depending on the context. In political and social history, it is a negative term, indicative of a deviation from a norm. In philosophy, particularly the cosmological philosophy established in *The Book of Changes*, it represents a vital force in the movement of the universe and hence is a positive word.²³ The Great

Preface seemed to have used it exclusively in its moral and historical sense. Still, it considers the mutated poems in *The Book of Songs* to be the proper models because in any event they are thought to have “emerged from feelings and stopped at rites and morality.”²⁴ In other words, as long as poetry expresses what is deeply felt and conforms to the moral and political principles of government, it is good poetry. But there is a subtle contradiction in this phrasing, because “emerging from feelings” (*fahu qing* 發乎情) implies a spontaneity and naturalness that are undercut by “stop at rites and morality” (*zhihu liyi* 止乎禮義), which suggests a deliberate, artificial imposition of controls. Therefore, the canonical notion of poetry is problematic because these two basic demands are potentially irreconcilable, and the balance between them is at best precarious.

As we will see throughout the following chapters, artistic control is a prominent feature of Chinese decadent poetry. However, such control is not exercised for moral and political reasons as is demanded by the Great Preface. Instead, it has been radically transformed into something purely aesthetic.

We might call this way of thinking “a decline mentality.” Confucius himself is the earliest authority of such a mentality.²⁵ He is obsessed with the notion that he lives in an era of decadence, a time that has fallen from the old glory of the Western Zhou dynasty (1045–711 B.C.). He looks back nostalgically to that lost golden age: “How beautiful [are the ways of Zhou]; I am a follower of Zhou!”²⁶ He laments the loss of political and cultural unity and the invasion of barbarian culture. He instructs his students to “abandon the music of Zheng (*zhengsheng* 鄭聲), distance themselves from villains; for the music of Zheng is lascivious, and villains are dangerous.”²⁷ But in Confucius’s strongest lament about the decline of his age, he metaphorically fuses his own personal decline and historical decadence: “How far I have declined (*shuai* 衰); it has been a long time since I dreamed of the Duke of Zhou!”²⁸ This touching statement will bear heavily upon the minds of Chinese literati as it comes to be linked to the fate of culture and literature. Not just politically and socially is their age a decadent one, but their writing too represents a decline from the achievement of our ancestors. Although some writers did try to discredit this self-effacing mentality, it remained influential throughout Chinese classical tradition.²⁹

On the significance of the Great Preface, especially the part on “mutated poems” (*bianfeng bianya* 變風變雅) in *The Book of Songs*, Stephen Owen comments:

Chinese literary historical process was often described in terms of movement between “proper” (*zheng* 正) and “mutated” (*bian* 變). These terms are replete with value judgment and in this context are firmly linked to issues of moral history. *Zheng* describes the stability of a government and society functioning properly, a stability that is manifest in the “tone” of poems of the age. *Bian* appears in this context as a falling away, a “devolution,” in which the growing imbalances in society manifest themselves in poetry. These terms never became entirely free of value judgments that were ultimately rooted in moral history; in later ages, however, there was some attempt to use them in a purely literary sense. In this context *zheng* might represent the norm of some genre, the *bian* would be a falling away from that norm; these processes of attaining a norm and subsequent devolution might operate independently from the moral history of dynasties.³⁰

We may of course argue that the very separation of literature from its moral and sociopolitical environment represents a decadent step on the part of later writers and critics, a *bian*, falling away, from *zheng*, the proper, the norm.³¹

In Chinese tradition the theoretical model for decadence is provided not only by Confucius and the Great Preface, but also by the reputed founder of Daoism, Laozi 老子. He situates his Dao (道 the Way) in a state of utter innocence in which there is no differentiation, no language; all is in an organic harmony:

Dao is eternal, nameless. Though the uncarved block seems small, it may be subordinated to nothing in the world. If kings and barons can preserve it, all creation would of itself pay homage, heaven and earth would unite to send sweet dew, and people would of themselves achieve peace and harmony.

Once the block is cut, names appear. When names begin to appear, know then that there is a time to stop. It is by this knowledge that danger may be avoided.

道常無名，樸。雖小，天下莫能臣。侯王若能守之，萬物將自賓。天地相和，以降甘露，民莫之令而自均。始制有名，名亦既有，夫亦將知止，知止可以不殆。³²

Laozi describes Dao as an “uncarved block”—a metaphor of profound and rich implications. In his writings it represents an ideal state that incorporates all elements, human and nonhuman, into an organic harmony through its negative quality. Because it is *not* carved, it paradoxically remains open to everything and can include everything. The values implied by the metaphor of the uncarved block are opposed to craftsmanship and any connections with craftsmanship. Naturalness is the ideal, so is simplicity as opposed to artificiality and elaboration. The Great Preface dooms Chinese poetry to perpetual decline by claiming that the process is already evident even in the very book that it sets up as the canon. But the author of the Great Preface saw the reasons for such decline as social and political, and somehow manageable, at least theoretically under enlightened rulers. Nevertheless, neither Confucius nor the author of the Great Preface seem to have felt much real optimism. Laozi is more unrelenting. For him, any effort at shaping human life is tantamount to carving the uncarved block, and therefore decadent. And this refers not just to literature, but to the whole of human culture.

However, it is precisely with the metaphor of carving that literature is later associated. The Eastern Han philosopher Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 B.C.–A.D.18) gave up his career as a writer of rhyme-prose (*fu* 賦) because he regarded it contemptuously as “a petty skill of insect carving” and therefore is not worthy of a gentleman.³³ As Yang Xiong lived in a time when Confucius’s thought had recently been made into an orthodoxy and thus still held sway over people’s thinking,³⁴ it is not surprising that he abandoned his rhyme-prose writing on Confucian grounds. He thought it did not have a moral and political function. Later, in the Southern Dynasties period, when orthodox Confucianism suffered a major decline in almost every aspect of Chinese culture,³⁵ the values implied by the metaphor of carving changed dramatically. The Southern Dynasties critic Liu Xie 劉勰 (c. 465–520) incorporated the metaphor into the title of his monumental work on literary theory and criticism: *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (*The literary mind and the carving of dragons*).³⁶ Although the image of carving remains the same, the object of carving has been changed.

Laozi's uncarved block symbolizes the undifferentiated state of harmony between humankind and its world. In Yang Xiong the insect speaks for itself as trivial; but in Liu Xie what is carved is the fanciful, extravagant dragon, which, with its rich associations of grandeur and power in Chinese culture,³⁷ evokes feelings of awe and respect. No longer condemned as by Laozi and Yang Xiong, carving for Liu Xie is to be celebrated. The *Literary mind and the carving of dragons* is an important part of a critique of the established views of literature since Confucius's age, a critique that is reflected in numerous writings of the Southern Dynasties period. In many ways Liu Xie's work sums up the thinking and rethinking of the issues related to literature, its values, functions, and characteristics; hence it deserves a closer look.

I will touch on only those parts of Liu Xie's huge and complicated book that are directly relevant to our study of decadent poetry. First, in using the metaphor of carving in the title of his work, Liu Xie affirms the value of craftsmanship in literature (*wen* 文).³⁸ As has been shown, spontaneity and naturalness had always been highly prized in the writings of earlier periods. Confucianism and Daoism, however much they differ on other matters, converge on this. Confucian poetic theory disdains craftsmanship. It views the nature of poetry as a spontaneous, sincere response to an external event. Therefore, any attempt to polish the product betrays an insincerity in motivation and results in artificiality in style. The Daoist rejection of craftsmanship stems from a worldview that only the pristine state is able to retain the healthy harmony that civilization, with its differentiation and division, inevitably destroys. In this system craftsmanship is the typical evil of civilization. By contrast, there is Liu Xie, who in Stephen Owen's view, is trying to "dissociate his idea of craft from the pejorative associations that hover around all terms for craft in Chinese."³⁹ It seems that Liu Xie wants more than just a dissociation; rather, he actually rejects those pejorative associations.

Certainly there are many passages in Liu Xie's book that seem to support orthodox views of literature. In the first three chapters—entitled "Yuandao" 原道 ("On the origin of the way [of literature]"), "Zhengsheng" 徵聖 ("On following the ancient sages"), and "Zongjing" 宗經 ("On following the classics")—he systematically recounts the Confucian poetic theory. But even in these passages Liu Xie struggles, as Confucius had done before, to strike a balance between the content of literature and its form:

Yan He wrongly thought that Confucius painted on the already colorful feathers of birds and that he vainly used florid language. But his accusation against the Sage missed its point. The patterned writings [*wen*] of the Sage are full of elegance, but their beauty is accompanied by solid substance. Although the Way of Heaven is hard to know, we still try to investigate it. The beautiful patterns of literary works [*wenzhang* 文章]⁴⁰ are not hidden from us; how can we afford not to think about them?

顏闔以爲：“仲尼飾羽而畫，徒事華辭。”雖欲訾聖，弗可得已。然則聖文之雅麗，固銜華而配實者也。天道難聞，猶或鑽仰；文章可見，胡寧勿思。⁴¹

In this passage Liu Xie rebuts the accusation against Confucius using the Confucian argument that “words without *wen* (form or pattern) do not go very far” and therefore cannot carry out their mission, which is the expression of the author’s will. But like Confucius, in giving so much weight to the function of *wen* in fulfilling a sociopolitical task, Liu Xie inevitably slants toward one pole of the Confucian golden mean and consequently risks disrupting it. This tendency is further illustrated by the following paragraph on “Verbal Parallelism” (“*lici*” 麗辭):

Therefore the beauty in verbal parallelism lies in artistry and cleverness; but in factual parallelism appropriateness is the most important. If in a couplet the two paralleled events are of unequal qualities, it is like using a steed to pull the left of a carriage while using a nag on its right. If an event is left alone unmatched it is like the one-legged monster *kui* that hobbles and limps. If [a literary work] does not have a unique spirit, or if its patterns [*wen*] lack outstanding colors, then even if it uses parallelism its dullness can only make us drowsy. The important thing is to make one’s thinking coherent and the factual parallelism complexly pertinent, and to make the colors of the paired jade match. One should alternate single and coupled elements, and harmonize the brilliance [of the writing] by adopting various kinds of pendants: this is the most important. If one ponders hard along this line, the secret [of verbal parallelism] will be shown of itself.

是以言對爲美，貴在精巧；事對所先，務在允當。若兩事相配，而優劣不均，是驥在左驂，駑爲右服也。若夫事或孤立，莫與相偶，是夔之一足，踰蹕而行也。若氣無奇類，文乏異采，碌碌麗辭，則昏睡耳目。必使理圓事密，聯璧其章。迭用奇偶，節以雜佩，乃其貴耳。類此而思，理自見也。⁴²

We have here a technical manual of parallelism. The emphasis on “artistry and cleverness” (*jingqiao* 精巧) is unmistakable, although Liu Xie also warns his readers to avoid mere cleverness—creating beautiful patterns devoid of a vital content. The images of jewelry (jade, pendants) are signatures of such emphasis. He also points out that dull style, no less than dull content, can put people to sleep. Style is at least as important as content. Here he rejects Confucius’s presumption that “those who have virtue will have words [that is, know how to express their virtue in words]; those who have words do not necessarily have virtue.”⁴³ He can not accept Confucius’s claim that inner virtue will inevitably produce graceful expression. Good writing, says Li Xie, comes from painstaking practice.

We have already remarked that Laozi’s worldview leads him to the condemnation of human culture, of which *wen* is an essential part. But one of the Confucian classics, *Zhou yi* 周易 or *The Book of Changes*, offers another worldview. It elevates the status of *wen* by linking it to the structure of the universe and the creation of human language. It regards the *wen* of humankind as having a correspondence to the *wen* of the universe and believes that they illuminate one another:

[The ancient sages] observe the patterns (*wen*) of heaven to investigate the changes of seasons; they observe the patterns (*wen*) of human kind to accomplish the transformation of the world.

觀乎天文以察時變，觀乎人文以化成天下。⁴⁴

By following closely the correspondence between them, the sages of ancient times were able to create a unique human culture by providing humankind with a language:

In ancient times, when Pao Xi ruled over the world, he lifted his head to observe the signs of heaven; he bent down to observe

the orders of the earth. He observed the patterns (*wen*) of birds and beasts, and the appropriateness of the earth. He obtained [ideas] from his own person, and from objects afar. Thereupon he invented the Eight Trigrams.

古者包犧氏之王天下也，仰則觀象於天，俯則觀法於地，觀鳥獸之文與地之宜，近取諸身，遠取諸物，於是始作八卦。⁴⁵

Later, when *wen* was linked to writing and identified with literature, the implications of such theory could be enormously rich. Writers with an aesthetic bent were only too eager to use this classic authority to advocate their own views of literature. In the opening chapter of *Wenxin diaolong*, Liu Xie elaborates on this:

Human patterns (*wen*) originated in the Ultimate Origin. The symbols in the *The Book of Changes* are the earliest manifestations of this divine light. Pao Xi started it by drawing [the eight trigrams], and Confucius offered his explanations by writing the “Wings” [explanations]. The chapter “Patterned Words” was written especially by him to explain the *qian* and the *kun*. The patterns (*wen*) of words are indeed the heart of Heaven and Earth!

人文之元，肇自太極，幽贊神明，易象惟先。庖犧畫其始，仲尼翼其終。而乾坤兩位，獨制文言。言之文也，天地之心哉！⁴⁶

The literary and aesthetic arrangement of writing, or “patterns of words” (*yanzhiwen* 言之文) in Liu Xie’s phrasing, is presented as the manifestation of the structure of the universe. It is no surprise that in the following passage Liu Xie argues that the aesthetic quality of patterns, *wen*, physical and human, is natural (*ziran* 自然):

With the emergence of mind/heart, language is created, and when language is created, its patterns (*wen*) become manifest: such is the way of nature. This applies to myriad of things in the universe, because both animals and plants have their patterns (*wen*). Dragons and phoenixes portend wondrous events through the picturesqueness of their appearances, and tigers and leopards display their graceful manners through the colorful stripes on

their bodies. The sculptured brilliance of clouds surpasses the painters' works in their artistry, and the blossoms of plants depend on no embroideries of the craftsmen for their marvelous grace. How could one say that they rely on external adornment? They are natural, that is all.

心生而言立，言立而文明，自然之道也。傍及萬品，動植皆文：龍鳳以藻繪呈瑞，虎豹以炳蔚凝姿；雲霞雕色，有逾畫工之妙；草木賁華，無待錦匠之奇；夫豈外飾，蓋自然耳。⁴⁷

Liu Xie here seems to be engaging in the debate over the relative merits of the natural and the artificial, and in this passage he clearly inclines toward the natural, in his regard for the beautiful patterns of the objects of the universe as spontaneous manifestations of nature's wonder and therefore surpassing by far the work of any human craftsman. But in the same chapter he also recounts the past literary glory of the ancient sages like Confucius:

When birds' marks replaced knotted ropes, writing first emerged. . . . Lord Shun was the first to compose songs and use them to express his will, and the suggestions put forward by his ministers Bo Yi and Hou Ji set a precedent for future memorials. Then the House of Xia arose, with its lofty achievements and great merits. The nine elements and orders are in perfect harmony and were celebrated in songs, and the House became still richer in attainment of virtue. By the time of Shang and Zhou, literary form (*wen*) surpassed the substance. The "hymns" and "odes" [of *The Book of Songs*] shine fresher daily in flowery brilliance. When King Wen was in trouble, his oracular judgments glowed bright; couched in rich and cryptic language, they contain subtle meanings, solidly grounded and profound. And Dan, the versatile Duke of Zhou, further glorified these achievements by composing poetry and compiling the "hymns" [in *The Book of Songs*], polishing with ax (*fuzao* 斧藻) [the literary qualities] of all kinds of writings. Our Master [Confucius], standing without peer among the early sages, continued this glorious tradition. The Six Classics, after he has cast and molded (*rongjun* 鑄鈞)

them, ring out the resonant music of bronze and jade. He carved and chiseled (*diaozhuo* 雕琢) human feelings, and interweaved the diction and style [of these works].

自鳥跡代繩，文字始炳。…元首載歌，既發吟詠之志；益稷陳謨，亦垂敷奏之風。夏後氏興，業峻鴻績，九序惟歌，勳德彌縟。逮及商周，文勝其質，雅頌所被，英華日新。文王患憂，繇辭炳曜，符采復隱，精意堅深。重以公旦多才，振其微烈，刪詩緝頌，斧藻群言。至夫子繼聖，獨秀前哲，鎔鈞六經，必金聲而玉振；雕琢情性，組織辭令⁴⁸

This is an extremely revealing but also puzzling passage. Liu Xie holds that a golden age in Chinese literature was realized in the writings of a group of sages who are presented as extraordinary craftsmen. He judges their success in terms of technical accomplishment, which is ironic to say the least because this chapter, which opens Liu Xie's entire discussion, is supposed to trace the ultimate origin of literature.⁴⁹ Not only are their writings described as having a strong sensual and formal quality, to the extent that "literary form (*wen*) surpassed the substance," but the activities of these ancient sages are described in language and imagery usually used to describe the activities of craft workers: to polish with ax (*fuzao* 斧藻), to cast and mold (*rongjun* 鎔鈞), to carve and chisel (*diaozhuo* 雕琢), to interweave (*zuzhi* 組織). These images, with their echoes of craftsmanship, completely undermine Liu Xie's previous statement that human *wen* is, like the *wen* of the physical world and animals, natural, and that natural beauty surpasses artificial ornaments. Most significantly, Liu Xie's phrase to describe Confucius's activity of editing and compiling ancient classics, *diaozhuo* (to carve, to chisel), is to become the standard term to describe an ornately decadent literary style.⁵⁰ This puzzling, self-contradictory passage highlights again the tension between form (*wen* 文) and content (*zhi* 質), a phenomenon that was well established even in Confucius's time. Liu Xie may want to achieve the equilibrium between the two poles, but his own language and metaphors speak to a different position.

By Liu Xie's time, then, literary theory had undergone immense changes. Critics were increasingly more concerned with form and other technical aspects of writing. Literature, particularly poetry, was no

longer conceived solely as a natural, spontaneous response to a historical event but instead began to be regarded as a craft. This trend is reflected in the critical discourse of the time, which is filled with the vocabulary of craftsmanship. This important shift signals that poetic production was beginning to be removed from the author's mind/heart as stipulated by canonical documents like the Great Preface. The separation between the poet's personality and his work, which was to be boldly and unequivocally announced by Xiao Gang, is already taking shape here.

The vigorous rethinking of literature and its values during the late period of Southern Dynasties was encouraged by royal figures like Xiao Tong, Crown Prince Zhaoming 昭明太子蕭統 (501–31) and his brother Xiao Gang who later became the Emperor Jianwen of the Liang dynasty. Yet another example of using the classic link between *wen* of the universe and *wen* of humankind to elevate the status of literature is found in Xiao Tong's preface to *Wen xuan* 文選, the first comprehensive literary anthology of China:

式觀元始 眇觀玄風	Let us examine the primordial origins of civilization, And distantly observe the customs of the remote past.
冬穴夏巢之時	Times when men dwelled in caves in winter, nests in summer,
茹毛飲血之世	Eras when people consumed raw meat and drank blood.
世質民淳 斯文未作 逮乎伏羲氏之 王天下也	It was a pristine age of simple people, And our culture (<i>siwen</i>) ⁵¹ had not yet been invented. Then when Fu Xi ruled the empire,
始畫八卦	He first Drew the Eight Trigrams,
造書契	Created writing (<i>shuqi</i>),
以代結繩之政	To replace government by knotted ropes.
由是文籍生焉	From this time written records came into existence.
易曰：“觀乎天文	The <i>Changes</i> says, “Observe the patterns (<i>wen</i>) of the sky,
以察時	To ascertain the seasonal changes.
觀乎人文	Observe the patterns (<i>wen</i>) of man,

以化成天下。” To transform the world.”

文之時義遠矣哉!⁵² The temporal significance of patterned writing (*wen*)
is far-reaching indeed!

Xiao Tong states that it is culture (*siwen* 斯文) that single-handedly rescued us from the primitive, animallike state, and that writing, especially writing with aesthetic qualities (*wenji* 文籍), is the most essential part of this culture. This effort to eulogize literary writing and its functions tends also to result in privileging belles lettres over other genres. Thus Xiao Tong excluded the works of pre-Qin philosophers from his anthology on the grounds that “the main purpose [of these writings] is to formulate ideas, not to establish [beautiful textual] patterns (*wen*)” (蓋以立意爲宗，不以能文爲本).⁵³ Although Xiao Tong still adhered to the Confucian poetic doctrine that poetry expresses one’s will,⁵⁴ his criterion for selecting and categorizing texts clearly reflects a tendency toward aestheticism. As David Knechtges puts it, Xiao Tong has come “close to conveying the idea of pure literature.”⁵⁵

This aesthetic tendency in the literary theory of the Southern Dynasties produced an intense awareness of the formal, especially musical, qualities of poetry. In the past Chinese poetry had relied for its musical quality on natural, unanalyzed word sounds. Moreover, rhyme and metrical pattern, though always important in Chinese poetry, had not been studied separately and independently. This was to be expected, because before the Southern Dynasties period poetry had never been considered an independent subject of learning, but instead had always been related to a larger sociopolitical and moral context. But by the Southern Dynasties many poets and scholars were drawn to the study of the metrical pattern.⁵⁶ This study in turn laid the foundation for the metrical pattern of regulated verse that would reach its consummation in the hands of Tang poets like Du Fu. The leading advocate of this so-called *yongming* 永明 poetry was Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), whose “Biographical Sketch of Xie Lingyun” 謝靈運傳 in *Song shu* 宋書 (*The History of [Liu] Song Dynasty*) offers a most complete statement of this metrical theory:

Now, if I were to bare my breast and speak from the heart in evaluating the skill or awkwardness of former writers, it seems

that there is something more to be said. Take the five colors that complement each other or the eight musical timbres that sound harmoniously in concert. They are just like the shades dark and yellow or the *yin* and *yang* pitch pipes, each of which is suited to its appropriate object. One would want to have the notes *gong* and *shang* alternating with each other or the lowered and raised pitches tempering each other. Whenever there is a floating sound in the first line of the couplet, it must be followed by a cut-off echo in the corresponding syllable of the second line. Within a single line the sounds and rhymes should all be unique, and between the two lines of a couplet the patterns of light and heavy should be completely different. It is only with those who subtly understand these general principles that one can begin to talk about refined writing (*wen*).

若夫敷衽論心，喬榷前藻，工拙之數，如有可言。夫五色相宣，八音協暢，由乎玄黃律呂，各適物宜。欲使宮羽相變，低昂互節，若前有浮聲，則後須切響。一簡之內，音韻盡殊；兩句之中，輕重悉易，妙達此旨，始可言文。⁵⁷

Even without delving into the details of Shen Yue's view of metrical pattern in poetry, this quotation demonstrates that during the Southern Dynasties poetry was liberated from its previous dependence on politics and morality to become an independent subject of learning, with its own principles, its own values, and its own logic of development. This is an enormous step, especially in the context of a culture in which sociopolitical and moral values have always overwhelmed other concerns.⁵⁸ However, it was precisely these sociopolitical and moral values that was ignored by Shen Yue in his essay. He concentrated instead exclusively on the technical and aesthetic aspects of poetry. If this "decadent" attitude is implied here by the assiduous exclusion of the traditional values associated with poetry, it was made explicit by Xiao Gang in that bold statement that "the principle of one's personal cultivation is different from the principle of literary composition. In personal cultivation one should be prudent, but in literary composition one should be unrestrained."⁵⁹

What a novel and radical separation of literary production from moral cultivation, unquestionably a deliberate refutation of the canonical view that literature, especially poetry, is the externalization

of one's will or moral character and that it reflects a political and social reality. For how can we know the character of the author through his writing, as Yang Xiong assumed we could,⁶⁰ or how can we discern the sociopolitical background of the author and his time, which was considered as essential by Confucius and the Great Preface, if there is a disjunction between the writing and its author? Obviously a virtuous author is capable of composing very unprincipled poetry, and vice versa. This view of disjunction actually invalidates the cherished notions about the moral and sociopolitical functions of poetry, which form the cornerstone of the Chinese poetic tradition.

On other occasions Xiao Gang still espoused the orthodox view that poetry expresses one's feelings. For example, in a letter to his cousin Prince Xiang Dong (與湘東王書) Xiao Gang complains that the literature produced at the capital at that time was "shallow, superficial and totally silly" because the writers never bothered to "chant their feelings" (*yinyong qingxing* 吟詠情性).⁶¹ By implication, if those poets had tried to express their feelings, their poetry would not have sunk to its lamentable state. But how should one reconcile this claim for the analogy of personal feeling and the quality of literary production with the precisely opposite view that there is absolutely no connection between one's personal character and one's writing? In fact, Xiao Gang's own poetry, especially those in decadent line, expresses very little of his feelings; nor is it meant to do so. His espousal of the canonical concept of poetry is therefore either mere lip service or politically motivated.⁶²

Xiao Gang's name has always been associated with Palace Style poetry (*gongtishi* 宮體詩).⁶³ Ever since its flowering in the court of the Southern Dynasties, it was an embarrassment, an anathema, to orthodox literati and was condemned for its decadent style and subject matter. A detailed study of the stylistic features of Palace Style poetry will be the subject of the next chapter. For the moment, let us consider the theoretical assumptions behind it and why it offended conventional taste.

The literary agenda of Palace Style poetry is fully represented by *Yutai xinyong* 玉台新詠 (*New songs from a jade terrace*), an anthology of love and amorous poetry compiled by the court poet Xu Ling 徐陵 (507–83) under the commission of Xiao Gang.⁶⁴ Xu Ling's half-joking preface can be considered as a manifesto for the new, decadent trend in the poetry of the time. Since it is crucial to our study of

poetic texts in the following chapters, I will quote this long preface in some detail:

夫凌雲概日	There were palaces that reach clouds and obstruct the sun—
由余之所未窺	These are what You Yu ⁶⁵ had never seen.
千門萬戶	One thousand gates, ten thousand houses—
張衡之所曾賦	These are what Zhang Heng ⁶⁶ once wrote about.
周王璧台之上	On the jade terrace of the King of Zhou,
漢帝金屋之中	In the gold house of the Emperor of Han,
玉樹以珊瑚作枝	There are jade trees with coral boughs,
珠簾以玳瑁爲押	And pearl blinds with tortoiseshell pendants.
其中有麗人焉	Within were found beautiful women.
其人也五陵豪族	They are ladies from the aristocratic houses of Wuling,
充選掖庭	Who were chosen for the imperial harem.
四姓良家	They are girls of the best families of Four Clans,
馳名永巷	Renowned throughout the long streets.
亦有潁川新市	There are also beauties from Yingchuan and Xinshi,
河間觀津	[Lovely girls from] Hejian and Guanjin.
本號嬌娥	One of them was originally called “Delicate Fair,”
曾名巧笑	Another was once named “Dainty Smile.”
楚王宮里	In the palaces of Chu
無不推其細腰	There was none who did not admire their slender waists;
衛國佳人	The fair women of Wei
俱言訝其纖手	All marveled at their delicate hands.
閱詩敦禮	They are well versed in <i>The Book of Songs</i> and <i>Rites</i> ,
豈東鄰之自媒	Quite different from the east neighbor ⁶⁷ who did her own matchmaking!
婉約風流	Their charming, romantic airs
異西施之被教 ⁶⁸	Are not different from those of Xi Shi after she had been trained.

The list of beautiful women, their graceful behaviors, and precious ornament continues for another three pages in Birrel’s English translation. How far the subject matter of this “new” poetry has strayed from the classical tradition! Gone is the noble sociopolitical and moral function, to be replaced with tales of the entertainment quarters of