

## Chapter 1



# *The Literary Response to the Mid-Tang Crisis*

A clear consensus about how to solve the Tang dynasty's problems emerged in the half century following the An Lushan rebellion. A century later, by the middle of the ninth century, educated men had developed a coherent and persuasive approach that responded directly to challenges faced by both the ruling family and its capital bureaucracy. It was an essentially conservative program that sought to restore and reinvigorate the culture that had reached its zenith during the reign of Tang Xuanzong. Although members of the Great Clans participated in its development, the most eloquent spokesmen for this philosophy were men whose families had more recently established themselves in government service. Men such as Quan Deyu, Bai Juyi, and Liu Yuxi expressed their gratitude to the Tang by defending the central features of its political and intellectual culture.<sup>1</sup>

Traumatic events and social disruption often produce an intense longing for earlier periods of stability. Rarely, however, do the earlier assumptions underlying such stability survive the cataclysm. The century following the An Lushan rebellion, characterized as it was by numerous other rebellions and the fundamental restructuring of both government and society, witnessed the emergence of a number of intellectual alternatives. All sought to reestablish Tang power and provide the social order necessary for advancing the general welfare. The mainstream consensus that emerged from this debate revitalized earlier ideas and gave them a more systematic explication.

This mainstream approach had deep roots. Some aspects went back to the early years of the Tang dynasty.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it drew its ultimate inspiration from the Classics of antiquity. It was not, however, a disembodied philosophy derived simply from abstract intellectual speculation. It was instead formulated by experienced government offi-

officials to respond to a particular set of challenges. These officials were, or at least aspired to be, located in the capital bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup> Their own power hinged on their ability to maintain that bureaucracy's control over affairs, but, as we have seen, military and financial exigencies during and after the rebellion undermined that institutional power. The mainstream approach was a carefully constructed explanation of why the regular bureaucracy and the officials who legitimately staffed it were essential to the Tang restoration.

The centerpiece of this approach was the assertion of the continuing validity of literary culture as the instrument for ordering the world. The ancient concept *wen* encapsulated the ideals of this culture. Although many scholars have discussed the importance of this concept, both in general and for the Tang specifically, a brief description of the term and its significance will help set the stage for the following discussion of mainstream literary thought. At its simplest, the term describes anything characterized by a pattern. Yet, this is a particular kind of pattern; it is a manifest pattern. In other words, it is a pattern that is evident to the senses. It was quickly implicated in cosmological thought, and thereby became one of the first means for grounding human norms in the larger structure of the universe.

This, however, gets ahead of the story. *Wen* was applied to the universe in two ways. First, patterns were found in the phenomena of nature. Second, these patterns were interpreted as guides to action. An important interpretive jump was thus made. From the empirical action of finding patterns, philosophers concluded that phenomena, since they were part of the universe, had to have patterns. There followed the identification of patterns in the most important elements of the universe. Thus, because the cosmos had pattern, Heaven, Earth, and human beings were each believed to be characterized by observable patterns. Such patterns could guide human action. As the *Yijing* pointed out, "One should observe the patterns of Heaven to investigate the changes in the seasons."<sup>4</sup> In an empire with an agricultural economy, this was good advice, but, more important, it also suggested a normative aspect to *wen*.

The identification of characteristic patterns was, in most cases, fairly straightforward since they suggested themselves naturally. Thus, the Heavens revealed their pattern in the luminous celestial bodies, including the sun, the moon, and the stars. Topology, as embodied in the rivers and mountains, constituted the pattern of the Earth. Yet, what about humans? The *Yijing* was also clear that Heaven, Earth, and humans formed a special triad, so humans had to have a pattern. Philosophers found it in human culture. Human culture (*ren wen* 人文) included many

discrete phenomena. Certainly ritual was an important component, as were the arts, such as music and literature. These human cultural patterns were, in many ways, empirical phenomena and therefore descriptive. Writing, for example, was a special preserve of human beings, but it connected humans to the larger cosmos through the ancient myth of the origin of writing in a Sage's observation of bird tracks.

Yet human culture was not simply descriptive. There was also a normative component to it. When applied to humans, the concept *wen* implied something that required further effort. Thus, writing was not simply a record of words, it was words crafted into a pattern. This was the basis for Confucius' admonition in the *Zuo zhuan* that "If words lack patterning (*wen*), then they will not proceed far."<sup>5</sup> The effort implied in human patterning was evident in all aspects of civilization, something that distinguished the civilized from the barbaric. On the basis of this assumption, early texts concluded that *wen* offered more than simply practical information, it was also a necessary moral guide for human beings. The same passage in the *Yijing* that suggested looking to the patterns of Heaven for information on the seasons concluded that men should "look to human cultural patterns (*ren wen*) to transform the world."

The mingling of descriptive and normative aspects in *wen*, combined with the breadth of phenomena to which premodern thinkers applied it, raises some complicated translation issues. Medieval thinkers relied on the concept's multivalence to encompass the various activities that they undertook. In the words of Stephen Owen:

A person who aspires to be *wen* will unite the semantic meanderings of the word: becoming *accomplished* through education, he may serve the government in a *civil* post, his capacity for such a position having been examined by a public test of his *writing*; he finds himself naturally drawn to *literature in which the "aesthetic pattern" (wen)* of the universe becomes manifest.<sup>6</sup>

With a term that connotes so much, translation difficulty is almost inevitable. This is not least because medieval thinkers in general and mid-Tang writers in particular depended on this multivalence to justify the pursuit of *wen* itself. In the pages that follow, I have attempted to translate the term according to the general thrust of a passage without trying to attain too restrictive a consistency. In general, there is a nested hierarchy of translations used here. When authors seem to be referring to very specific issues concerning writing, "literary" seems the best choice. At times, mid-Tang writers use *wen* to refer to the activity of producing

crafted texts. Here “literature” best expresses the idea. More broadly still, when usage implies more than just written activities yet still limits the term to intellectual activities or social customs, “culture” suggests itself as a reasonable rendering. Beyond culture, medieval thinkers also employed the term when they addressed the confluence of politics, culture, and morality, in other words, when they considered “civilization.” As such, it also often carries the sense of “refinement.” Finally, even in prefaces attached to literary collections, mid-Tang writers rarely ignored the cosmological parallels between celestial patterns and human literature. The existence of manifest patterns is the common denominator among all these levels. When that fact is particularly emphasized, I have highlighted it by including “pattern” in my translation.

There is one further complication. As we will see, medieval thinkers recognized the possibility of engaging in the activities that constituted *wen* without success. In other words, we can perceive in their usage both *wen* as culture and *wen* as proper culture, *wen* as literature and *wen* as good literature. This is simply another manifestation of the porous boundary between the descriptive and normative aspects of the term.

The starting point for the analysis of literary culture in the late eighth century continued to be the passage from the twenty-second hexagram of the *Yijing*. The passage assumed a direct parallel between the order that characterized the universe and the patterns that guided human society. Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648) and his committee made the assumptions of the passage explicit in their *Rectified Meanings of the Five Classics* (*Wujing zhengyi* 五經正義). Their commentary stressed the value of manifest patterns to the ruler. When it came to the natural world, the ruler could clearly recognize the signs that Nature provided to indicate the seasons. Such information was of obvious practical importance. The Sages, however, recognized that *wen* was also central to governance. Having examined human culture, they fashioned the classical canon that included poetry, speeches, ritual, and music to educate the people and thus bring order to society.<sup>7</sup> However, the agricultural pointers and cultural guidance that *wen* provided were not simply analogous. They were manifestations of a fundamental reality in which complementary values were in constant interaction and alternation. Both the Classic itself and its commentaries discussed this process in terms of two qualities: firmness (*gang* 剛) and suppleness (*rou* 柔). It was the interplay of these qualities that formed the evident patterns which served as guides for the Sages. Since the precise relationship of these qualities varied over time and the Classic exhorted the ruler to observe the patterns, the text implied that the actions of the rulers must change according to the situation at the moment. The *Yijing* passage

itself illustrated this by indicating the specific government measures that were ideally enacted when the age is dominated by the hexagram *Bi*.<sup>8</sup> As we will see, this idea of appropriate flexibility is central to the mainstream view.

The Sages understood that poetry, rhetoric, ritual, and music were the human manifestations of *wen*. This justified continuing attention to these arts. The twenty-second hexagram therefore often provided the starting point for the analysis of literature during the Tang period. A good example of this appears in the standard histories of the pre-Tang period compiled during the seventh century. The passage figures prominently in the introductions to the biographies of literary men collected in both the *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書 and the *Sui shu* 隋書.<sup>9</sup>

The passage remained influential through the late eighth and ninth centuries. Li Hua 李華 (c. 715–c. 774), the influential literary reformer, referred to the passage, as did his friend Xiao Yingshi 蕭穎士 (708–759).<sup>10</sup> Quan Deyu, who stressed his connection to Li and Dugu Ji,<sup>11</sup> also frequently used it.<sup>12</sup> Many less famous writers also drew on the passage's ideas.<sup>13</sup>

Traditionally educated men were predisposed by the *Yijing's* assertion that *wen* was a cosmological reality to see its manifestations everywhere. This continued in the post-rebellion period. Cui Youfu 崔祐甫 (721–780), for example, elaborated on the themes of the *Yijing*:

Heaven takes the sun, moon, longitude, and latitude as its *wen*; Earth takes hills, mounds, mountains, and rivers as its *wen*. Firmness and suppleness are mixed together. When applied to humans, the bells, chimes, and pipes form the *wen* of their music. The nine designs of imperial attire and the three types of greeting gifts form the *wen* of their ritual. The canons, mandates, chants, and songs give *wen* to their words.<sup>14</sup>

The omnipresence of *wen* meant that any efforts to improve the world had to make use of it. This was because reform essentially constituted a restoration of the ideal pattern. Cui immediately asserted that the efforts of great officials always proceeded via *wen*. Quan Deyu also noted that because the *Yijing* had made *wen* central to the social order “neither the four teachings of Queli nor the four categories of [Confucius'] disciples left out *wen*.”<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere he echoed Cui's assertion that culture was merely the human manifestation of an omnipresent pattern.<sup>16</sup>

By the mid-Tang period, however, there was sufficient evidence to conclude that not all *wen* was equal. The result was a shift from following a preexisting ideal pattern to reforming *wen* as it had historically developed. Since *wen* was central to good government, reforming

government required reforming the culture. This necessarily began with getting men who were properly educated into positions of authority. The result was a spirited debate over official recruitment. The twenty-second hexagram was cited in a memorial by Li Xiyun 李栖筠 (719–776) that defended the importance of *wen* while proposing an expansion of the school system and criticizing the superficial evaluation of literary ability in the examination system. Jia Zhi 賈至 (718–772) quoted Li and expressed his agreement.<sup>17</sup> Lü Wen 呂溫 (c. 774–c. 813) inadvertently attested to the pervasiveness of what we might call this literary interpretation of hexagram 22 and the tenacity of the idea that reform depended on literary endeavors. His essay, “On Transforming the World Through *wen*,” is a self-conscious effort to explain the passage because, although “there are those who can recite the words, there are not yet any who understand their meaning.”<sup>18</sup> Lü then, in contrast to the approach seen above, interpreted the passage as referring to the ethical responsibilities associated with different social roles.<sup>19</sup>

### Literary Decline and the Roots of Disorder

The idea that cultural corruption had a direct influence on the quality of government and therefore social welfare was not new in the late eighth century. Already in the first decades of the Tang dynasty, rulers and officials alike had sought to eliminate the defects that had appeared in the culture. By the early years of the Tang, the literary arts had become the most popular manifestation of human *wen* and therefore efforts to correct culture necessarily emphasized literary reform. What particularly worried early Tang commentators was the excessively ornate and artistic styles that dominated the southern imperial courts during the Period of Disunion.<sup>20</sup> The stability of the Tang, however, allowed the concern to recede. While there continued to be conventional calls for literary reform, most notably in the figure of Chen Ziang 陳子昂 (661–702),<sup>21</sup> a certain complacency developed that gave birth to the remarkable literary accomplishments of Tang Xuanzong’s reign.<sup>22</sup>

The An Lushan rebellion and the difficulties that followed in its wake shattered that complacency and reinvigorated the calls for reform. Many texts written in the late eighth and early ninth centuries recount the familiar idea that there was a gradual decline in the quality and effectiveness of literature after the Zhou dynasty. Quan Deyu noted the decline while Li Hua and Bai Juyi both believed that few literary men during the Kaiyuan 開元 (713–741) and Tianbao 天寶 (742–755) reign periods had realized literature’s ideals.<sup>23</sup>

The accounts of decline share a number of assumptions that help us reconstruct the logic behind the mainstream approach to reform. All assume that there is an interdependence between literary aesthetics and practical utility. This had long-standing classical sanction. The *Li ji* 禮記 noted that “King Wen 文王 governed by means of culture (*wen*).”<sup>24</sup> According to the *Zuo zhuan*, Confucius himself had recognized this: “When one has a purpose, words are to accomplish that purpose and embellishment (*wen*) is to complete the words. If one does not speak, who would understand one’s purpose? If the words lack embellishment, then they will not go far.”<sup>25</sup> Dugu Ji cited this passage when describing the post-classical decline of literature in his late-eighth-century preface to Li Hua’s literary collection.<sup>26</sup>

Post-rebellion scholars explained the decline by identifying two specific problems that plagued literary activities. The first was the absence of a guarantee that literary skill and moral behavior would coincide. In the early ninth century, Quan Deyu, for example, asked examination candidates to justify the continued use of literature on the examinations given that history had shown that great literary men were capable of significant moral lapses.<sup>27</sup>

The separation of morality and skill was possible because of a second problem: the distraction of artistry. After the An Lushan rebellion, scholars again voiced the worry that writers would become so enamoured of pointless literary display that they would forget the serious potential of the activity. In the immediate aftermath of the rebellion, Dugu Ji lamented that during the Six Dynasties period literary embellishment became ever more skillful while writers turned their backs on the Classics.<sup>28</sup> His contemporary Du Que 杜確 (fl. 767) believed that this period only valued the literary virtuosity of the “official style” (*guan ti* 官體) and neglected those with a sincere and upright style.<sup>29</sup>

At the beginning of the next century, Bai Juyi developed the idea even more fully. Bai’s preface to his New Music Bureau style poems (*xin yuefu* 新樂府) asserted that he wrote the poems “for the ruler, ministers, people, things, and affairs. They were not written for literary [considerations].”<sup>30</sup> An essay he wrote in 806 indicted those concerned with “empty beauty”:

Therefore, among students of composition, there are those who speak heedlessly and those who complete compositions elegantly. As a result, in the creation of songs, chants, lyrics, rhapsodies, stelaes, and encomia, there are often empty beauty and shameful phrases. If they circulate in the age, they will bring false praise and unjust slanders confusing [men

of] the age. If they are transmitted to posterity, then they will mix up true and false and bring doubt to the future.<sup>31</sup>

Bai was clearly worried about the moral implications of an interest in mere beauty. Not only could it undermine the moral compass of the present, it could spread to future generations. Bai's 815 letter to Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831) actually framed his understanding of the decline of literature in terms of the gradual loss of the ideal combination of moral values and beautiful language achieved in the Classics. Bai believed that the *Shijing's* use of natural imagery had achieved a perfect balance: "In all cases, the affective image (*xing* 興) emerges in the [specific natural object], but the principle returns to the [specific moral point]."<sup>32</sup> This was in marked contrast to the literature of the Six Dynasties, which was dominated by decorative literature. While he readily admitted that its poetry was often beautiful, it was only an empty beauty.<sup>33</sup>

Some scholars viewed the seductiveness of literary artistry as so problematic that they became suspicious of literature entirely. This ranged from caution to outright rejection. Liu Mian 柳冕 (c. 730–c. 804), for example, deemphasized *wen* in a letter to Du You 杜佑 (735–812).<sup>34</sup> In it, he saw *wen* as essential for reviving the Way of the kings of antiquity (*wang dao* 王道), but such a revival required changing the hearts and minds of the people through education in the Classics.<sup>35</sup> In 763, Yang Wan 楊綰 (d. 777) lamented the way that the *jinsshi* 進士 examination had become more and more fashionable, thus fostering a situation in which candidates only studied popular literature and did not even open the Classics.<sup>36</sup> Consistent with his call for getting to the real meaning of the Classics, Lü Wen criticized classical scholarship for being concerned only with words.<sup>37</sup>

That the attack on artistry was persistent and at times extreme is evident from various texts that sought to defend cultural pursuits. The challenge could come from two different directions. Liu Yuxi's "On Calligraphy," for example, rejects a utilitarian approach to calligraphy.<sup>38</sup> Dugu Yu 獨孤郁 (d. 814), son of Dugu Ji and son-in-law of Quan Deyu,<sup>39</sup> defended the larger significance of *wen* in his essay "Analyzing *wen*" (*bian wen* 辯文) in the face of views that emphasized ornament and mere skill (*yi yi* 一藝).<sup>40</sup>

### The Continuing Promise of Literary Pursuits

The conservative defense of *wen* was not simply a knee-jerk reaction to the changes that engulfed the Tang in the late eighth century. The scholar-officials who defended it did so because they saw its continuing potential to restore the power and glory of the Tang. That it did



not ultimately succeed is irrelevant. Up until the mid-ninth century thinking men were, more often than not, persuaded that it could. The most important promise that *wen* made was that it could connect the various aspects of human experience.

Those clamoring for reform in the post-rebellion years argued that *wen* was first and foremost the connection between the present and the Classics. The Classics were recognized as the repository of the teachings and techniques of the Sages. Literary writing (*wen zhang* 文章) was important because it was, in the phrase of Li Hua, “rooted in the Sages.” Being thus rooted, it carried the intentions (*zhi* 志) of the Classics.<sup>41</sup> His close associate, Dugu Ji, extended the scope of this temporal and moral connection. In his preface to Xiao Li’s 蕭立 (fl. 742) literary collection, Dugu asserted that “The gentleman polishes his phrases and establishes his sincerity. When living he uses comparisons (*bi* 比) and affective images to expand the Way. When he has died, he uses his compositions to pass [its riches] on to posterity.”<sup>42</sup> Taken together these two pieces suggest how *wen* carried values. Since literary writing was based on the Classics, scholars and officials used it to clarify moral behavior and policies in their own time. Furthermore, writing became a record of how moral men applied the ideals of the Classics in earlier times. Implicitly they were instructing later generations on how to apply the Classics to their own situations. The Classics were simply the first step in this chain. Thus, Jia Zhi noted that the Classics, as transmitted by Confucius, were the *wen* of the three ideal dynasties of antiquity (the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties).<sup>43</sup> *Wen* was thereby tied to the status of classical learning itself.

In the next generation, Quan Deyu picked up the idea of literature as a connection to the Classics. In several compositions, he argued that the decline of literature resulted from the loss of its connection to the Classics. His preface for Cui Yuanhan’s literary collection admitted that Mencius (371–289 B.C.) and Xunzi (c. 315–236 B.C.) had cultivated the Way, but even they were weak in classical scholarship. By the time of the *Sao* 騷 poets, Qu Yuan 屈原 (332–295 B.C.) and Song Yu 宋玉 (fl. fourth c. B.C.), the connection was so weak that literary documents (*wen xian* 文獻) had already deteriorated.<sup>44</sup> One of Quan’s examination questions likewise indicted the Hundred Schools of the Warring States period for “blocking the road” to the Classics. They had obscured the meaning of the Classics and thereby led people astray.<sup>45</sup>

Quan also expressed optimism about the potential of *wen* to improve upon the past. He had solid classical precedent for that optimism. His preface for Yang Ning’s 楊凝 (fl. 799) literary collection cited the Zhou experience:

The Zhou royal family was loyal and upright. Its culture was more complete than the two [previous] dynasties [i.e., the Xia and the Shang], and the Former Teacher [Confucius] sighed [because its *wen* was] “re-splendent.”<sup>46</sup>

Its use of culture made Zhou the greatest of the Three Dynasties. Quan went further. This pattern had been repeated in later history. The Han dynasty had similarly made use of *wen* to correct the abuses of the Qin period, and the Tang founders had followed the example of Zhou and Han when they established their own regime.<sup>47</sup> This relationship between Zhou success and its devotion to *wen* had already become a cornerstone of reform efforts. Jia Zhi seconded Li Xiyun’s opinion on the importance of *wen* even as he sought to curb the abuses of an excessively literary examination system:

Xia government policy emphasized loyalty; the Shang emphasized respect; and the Zhou emphasized *wen*. Since this was so, refinement, loyalty, and respect were all policies for governing the people. Moreover posthumous titles record one’s conduct. The most praiseworthy is *wen*. When *wen* flourishes, then loyalty and respect are therein preserved.<sup>48</sup>

Here *wen*, rendered as “refinement,” encompasses or implies mastery of other values. It was thus the way to implement moral virtues in society and the reason that the Zhou was the best of the Three Dynasties.

Besides this type of historical connection, *wen* also connected an individual’s inner (psychological or emotional) and outer (public) lives. Although I will discuss this topic at greater length in chapters 4 and 5, we must briefly address the topic to better understand the power of *wen* over the late-eighth-century imagination.

Since *wen* was the pattern evident in all things, it naturally revealed subtle realities. *Wen* joined inner and outer lives in two different ways. First, it served as an outlet for a good man’s frustration. Although Han Yu made the idea of “calling out when unsettled” (*bu ping ze ming* 不平則鳴) famous,<sup>49</sup> the idea already had a long history. It was, for example, central to traditional accounts of Qu Yuan’s writing.<sup>50</sup> More recently Quan Deyu referred to the idea in his congratulatory letter to his father-in-law when the latter became a grand counselor.<sup>51</sup>

To its portrayal as an emotional release was added the idea that *wen* was a signpost of moral worth. Thus, Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 (709–784) could begin his preface to Sun Di’s 孫逖 (fl. 755) literary collection with the assertion that “Composition in antiquity was the means by which [men] displayed their will and manifested their spirit.”<sup>52</sup> Many scholars

recognized that *wen* could also guide individuals in becoming moral men. This followed from the idea that *wen* could serve as a guide to society as a whole. Quan Deyu's preface to Yao Nanzhong's 姚南仲 (d. 803) literary collection, for example, envisions *wen* as something that scholars accumulate inside and that guides both their personal and public behavior.<sup>53</sup>

*Wen* provided a third connection, as well: that between government and the governed. Although he was certainly not alone, one of the most insistent advocates of this view was Bai Juyi. He was particularly interested in the institution of poetry collection supposedly employed during the Zhou dynasty.<sup>54</sup> Bai devoted the sixty-ninth essay of his *Celin* to this institution. He argued that there was a direct connection between the quality of government and popular feelings. It was essential, if the government was going to correct its deficiencies, to maintain a channel of communication between these two. Then, "if there is the tiniest bit of good in the administration, those below will certainly know. If there is the slightest defect in education, those above will certainly hear about it."<sup>55</sup> Bai returned to this idea a number of times in later years. His 815 letter to Yuan Zhen, for example, describes how he himself attempted to spur government change by composing poetry that he hoped would eventually make it to the emperor's ears.<sup>56</sup>

Other mid-Tang thinkers shared this traditional assumption that *wen* revealed the state of the realm. Liang Su 梁肅 (753–793), for example, had asserted at least two decades earlier that "Had it not been for *wen*, the Way, virtue, benevolence, and righteousness would not have been visible. Were it not for *wen*, the rites, music, punishments, and government policies would not have been established. In the flourishing or decay of *wen* can be seen the good order or chaos of the age."<sup>57</sup> He elsewhere asserted the strong connection between "the Way of literature" (*wen zhang zhi dao* 文章之道) and government (*zheng* 政).<sup>58</sup>

The political utility of *wen* became an important gauge of literary quality. Quan Deyu's preface to Cui Yuanhan's literary collection argues that literature is comprised of two streams: one that announces the ruler's intentions and one that praises virtue or narrates events.<sup>59</sup> Both streams were essentially political, and Quan underscored his message by including a list of nine functions that Cui's writing fulfilled. All, save one, concerned Cui's public life.<sup>60</sup>

Less than a decade later,<sup>61</sup> Bai Juyi illustrated how *wen* acted as a political model in the early Tang:

Since the Three Dynasties, this culture (*si wen* 斯文) had not been restored. Therefore Heaven bestowed [the mandate] on our dynasty because

corrupt practices were about to destroy it. The dynasty responded to Heaven with cultured virtue (*wen de* 文德); it governed the people with cultured teachings (*wen jiao* 文教); it selected worthies on the basis of cultured conduct (*wen xing* 文行); and recruited the elite (*shi*) on the basis of literary learning (*wen xue* 文學). For more than two hundred years, “literary writing blazed forth.”<sup>62</sup> Therefore scholars, whether worthy or not, all set their sights on *wen*.<sup>63</sup>

Bai saw *wen* as the unifying characteristic behind all of the functions of the state, from official recruitment to popular education.

### The Nature of the Literary Man

By the second decade of the ninth century, more systematic explications appeared that explained why *wen* was so important. Bai Juyi was at the forefront of that effort. Mutual stimulation was the heart of the matter. Changing human behavior required an appeal to feelings (*qing* 情). This worked because all were composed of the same substance:

With regard to the Sages and worthies above and the ignorant below, the insignificant [such as] piglets and fish, and the obscure [such as] ghosts and spirits: “all divide into [different] groups [by kind],”<sup>64</sup> but the energy (*qi* 氣) is the same. Their shapes are different, but their feelings (*qing*) are one.<sup>65</sup>

Bai’s 825 preface to the collected works of Yuan Zongjian 元宗簡 (d. 823) explains the relationship between this energy and culture (*wen*):

Between Heaven and Earth, there is pure and noumenous energy (*qi*). The myriad things all get it, but man gets it to a greater degree. Among humans, literary men get it to an even greater degree. I affirm that this energy condenses as the nature, comes forth as the will, and is distributed as culture (*wen*).<sup>66</sup>

*Wen*, then, develops organically from the very stuff of the universe. Bai, as others did, saw in this reality a more important point: namely, humans were privileged in their access to pure *qi*, and literary men were the most privileged of all. Bai was thus able to justify the special place reserved for the culturally accomplished.

His close friend, Liu Yuxi, adopted a similar view when he asserted that “Heaven bestows upright energy (*qi*) on the great man, and he must embellish it to make it bright in the world. The pure generative forces accumulate inside, and the spread of the sounds takes form in *wen*.”<sup>67</sup> Both Bai and Liu saw the literary man as the recipient of a special

endowment that gave him special responsibilities. The ability of the “great man” to fulfill those responsibilities resulted from the nature of the allotment itself.

This justification of the special role of the literary man responded to a real challenge. The accomplishments of the Tang military in the first century of its rule have certainly impressed later commentators who have seen a contrast between the martial traditions of the Tang and the civil virtues of later dynasties.<sup>68</sup> Even early in the Tang, however, scholars were worried about the impact of the military on state and society.<sup>69</sup> After the An Lushan rebellion, large sections of the country fell under the control of de facto independent military administrations.<sup>70</sup> The court responded to this situation with sustained efforts to create an effective military force of its own and periodic attempts to militarily intervene in the provinces. As David McMullen’s research suggests, during the eighth and ninth centuries, civil officials and scholars attempted to augment the importance of civil culture.<sup>71</sup> Although they certainly recognized the need for the military (*wu* 武), defenders of literary culture stressed the importance of using it at appropriate moments and restraining it with the civilizing influence of *wen*.

This was essentially the message of Li Song’s 李竦 (fl. 767) essay, “On Restraining the Military and Cultivating the Civil.” It recognized that military preparations and civil institutions were the “two handles” of the state but argued that, whereas civil institutions should be valued as a constant norm, the military was only useful at discrete moments of crisis.<sup>72</sup> A similar sentiment rests behind a rhapsody (*fu* 賦) composed by the Grand Counselor Pei Du 裴度 (765–839). Pei himself had had significant experience with military affairs and was particularly rewarded for his role in bringing the recalcitrant Huaixi 淮西 command (in southern Henan and northern Hubei) under central control in 818.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, his rhapsody, “Casting Swords and Lances into Plowshares,” celebrates the imperial accomplishment in bringing the world to peace and takes its rhymes from the line “when the world is without crisis, devote effort to agriculture and restrain the soldiers.” As with Li’s text, Pei’s implied that military activities should be abandoned as soon as possible.<sup>74</sup>

The preference for civil over military government was raised more directly in response to other political crises. Almost a decade before Pei wrote his rhapsody, Quan Deyu had urged the Emperor Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 806–820) to remove the commander of Zhaoyi 昭義 (in southern Hebei and southeastern Shanxi). Quan justified this partly on the grounds that unlike his father, whom he had succeeded, Lu Congshi 盧從史 (d. 810) had advanced through the military instead of via literary learning (*wen xue*).<sup>75</sup> This caution over military commanders was shared by others at

the time. Both Quan and Bai Juyi, for example, opposed what they saw as the irresponsible appointment of the Military Commissioner Wang E 王鏐 (740–815) as grand counselor in 810.<sup>76</sup>

Liu Yuxi was more specific than most other ninth-century thinkers on the relationship between martial and civil values. This was most likely connected to his early provincial service. After mourning his father, Liu served on the staff of the elder statesman Du You during the latter's campaign in 800 against Zhang Yin 張愔 (d. 805), the upstart son of Zhang Jianfeng 張建封 (735–800).<sup>77</sup> Almost four decades later he addressed the relationship between *wen* and *wu* more directly. In his preface to the literary collection of his friend Linghu Chu 令狐楚 (766–837),<sup>78</sup> Liu described Linghu's performance as military commissioner of Xuanwu 宣武 (in modern Henan and Anhui provinces)<sup>79</sup> and made an eloquent defense of the practical effectiveness of civil virtue:

Bianzhou was surrounded by fighting on all sides, so priority was given to [military] accomplishments (*gong* 功) when selecting its commander. The harsh penalties used and the esteem for the military resembled [Han Wudi's 漢武帝 (r. 140–87 B.C.) policy of] exterminating [officials who failed to suppress rebellion in their jurisdictions].<sup>80</sup> It had been called an "imperiled region"<sup>81</sup> for years. Linghu from the start regulated himself with purity and honesty. He treated others with kindness and trust. He eliminated the doubts of the many with evenhandedness. He eliminated the harsh enforcement of law with ritual and deference. From above, he transformed those below, and [his influence] quickly spread. He changed the sound in the Confucian temple, and there were none who returned to their old habits.<sup>82</sup>

The context of the passage is Liu's assertion that Linghu represents civil officials (*wen chen* 文臣) who achieve their positions via a talent for literary composition.<sup>83</sup> Readers would have assumed that "merit" (*gong* 功) referred to practical military accomplishments, but Liu instead asserted that only a man trained in the civil arts could provide the model of self-restraint necessary to change people's behavior, something coercion had failed to do.

Earlier in the decade Liu described the balance of martial and civil virtue in the establishment of the Tang dynasty itself:

Now the Tang settled the world with its divine martiality. When the various evils were cowed, it repeatedly showed its virtue with *wen*. . . . Therefore, among those who rose to become great officials through literary writing (*wen zhang*), Wei [Zheng] 魏徵 [580–643] became prominent because of his remonstrance, Ma [Zhou] 馬周 [601–648]

was promoted because of his wise plans, and Cen [Wenben] 岑文本 [595–645] was famous for his embellishment [of documents]. They did not labor in the wilds amidst the sweating horses [in the military camps], yet they had posts superior to the [militarily] meritorious officials. The Tang's esteem for *wen* was perfect. Later princes inherited [this tradition] and they usually entrusted state authority to literary scholars (*wen shi* 文士).<sup>84</sup>

Liu's message was explicit. What made the Tang great was its esteem for *wen*. The episode in Bianzhou explained why.

Li Jiang himself made a similar point in a memorial requesting improvement of the National University (*guo xue* 國學). Basing himself on an admonition to learning in the *Li ji*,<sup>85</sup> Li argued that "When one faces an emergency requiring a punitive expedition, then he gives military affairs priority; but when one encounters a time of order and peace, he places cultured virtue (*wen de* 文德) first."<sup>86</sup> The memorial then cited historical examples of rulers who understood the need to value learning even during crises.

Liu's description of Linghu Chu and Li's recommendations for the National University were premised on their faith that cultural learning was the best way to prepare men "to transform the world." Mainstream approaches to education are the subject of the next chapter, but we must note here that this was one of the central promises of *wen* in the century after 756. In a letter to Dugu Ji seeking instruction, Cui Yuanhan suggested that Dugu's work, by drawing on the literature of the Three Dynasties, could serve as a guide to morality.<sup>87</sup> Other thinkers used *wen*'s natural foundation to make their point. Gu Kuang 顧況 (b. c. 727), in his essay "On *wen*" saw *wen* and conduct as intimately connected and asserted that "If one abandons *wen*, then he abandons Heaven and has nothing he can take as a model; if he abandons Heaven, then he abandons Earth and has nothing to which he can pay attention; if he abandons Earth, then he abandons humans and he has nothing he can imitate."<sup>88</sup> In this connection, we might also recall Quan Deyu's portrayal of *wen* as moral guide in his preface to Yao Nanzhong's literary collection, a theme that also informs his preface for his own ancestor Quan Ruona 權若訥 (fl. 710).<sup>89</sup>

The fact that *wen* could act as a guide for human behavior explains why it was also useful for identifying worthy men. This, in turn, was the ultimate justification for the inclusion of literary composition on the *jinshi* examination.<sup>90</sup> Although more voices advocated greater attention to the substance of examination compositions,<sup>91</sup> post-rebellion scholars continued to assert that one's literary output indicated the kind of man one was. Thus Dugu Ji employed what was by then a hoary

cliché when he asserted that “When one looks at [Huangfu Ran’s 皇甫冉 (c. 717–c. 770)] compositions, one knows what he values.”<sup>92</sup> In the late 830s, Liu Yuxi indicated that literature produced before one became an important official should manifest “talent and beauty.”<sup>93</sup> This is how the government could identify those fit for government service. Yet we must ask what these scholars were seeking in the writings of their contemporaries.

### Completeness and Balance in Mainstream Thought

The calls for reform that ushered in post-rebellion intellectual culture were almost universal, but to distinguish the consensus that emerged from its more radical alternatives we must identify its defining characteristics. The most salient derived from the way that *wen* was believed to connect the various facets of human life. Literary men were enjoined to be “complete.” In other words, they should avoid a one-sidedness that could diminish their ability to respond to their situation. Thus, mid-Tang texts contain numerous references to what we might call the completeness ideal, most frequently expressed by the terms *quan* and *bei*. The ability to achieve completeness indicated a superior moral achievement that was often designated as “complete virtue” (*quan de* 全德).<sup>94</sup> The linking of complete virtue and literary pursuits was made early by Shang Heng 尚衡 (fl. 756) when he classified grades of *wen* in his essay, “Guide to the Literary Way”: “The *wen* of the gentleman is the best grade. Its virtue (*de*) is complete (*quan*).”<sup>95</sup> Others referred to the concept in a variety of occasional texts.<sup>96</sup>

Quan Deyu, however, developed the theme of “completeness” in the greatest detail. His essay, “Drunken Explanation,” explained how a text achieves the ideal:

Esteem vital energy (*qi*) and underlying order (*li* 理). Have simplicity (*jian* 簡) and comprehensiveness (*tong* 通). Those who are capable of good literature (*wen*) get it with these four. Those who are incapable also lose it with these four. If one realizes them in their entirety (*quan ran* 全然), then he has gotten it.<sup>97</sup>

The argument of the essay developed from this initial assertion of the need to balance what appear to be contradictory literary qualities. Quan then revealed why this ability to bring desirable qualities into harmony was so important. Writers with this skill can write appropriately for the situation. In fact, Quan’s literary models are such precisely because they have no set style. They adjust as appropriate.



Although Quan provided the most detailed discussion of completeness, literary reformers who lived through the An Lushan rebellion also employed it. Li Hua, for example, praised Cui Mian's 崔沔 (673–739) complete virtue.<sup>98</sup> Although he did not present it as an overarching ideal, Dugu Ji presented “completing one’s virtue” as one possible goal in a question written for the *xiucaai* 秀才 examination that asked candidates to explain how a series of seemingly contradictory moral imperatives could all be true.<sup>99</sup> Lu Tan 盧坦 (749–817), who was a decade older than Quan Deyu, urged Li Bo 李渤 (773–831) to emerge from retirement and devote himself to saving the world. He used both terms for complete, describing Li’s virtue as *quan* and his Way as *bei*.<sup>100</sup> There is, in short, no lack of references to *quan* and *bei*.<sup>101</sup>

The interest in completeness continued among mainstream scholars younger than Quan. Liu Yuxi made complete virtue the cornerstone of his evaluation of Linghu Chu’s life:

Alas! Heaven is stingy with its allotment, and it is difficult to have everything. Linghu was singularly endowed with cultural brilliance (*wen hua* 文華), met with a good age, held a string of noteworthy offices, and became a senior statesman. I say he was loyal, honest, filial, and friendly. He cherished the talented and accorded with things. He combined these pure qualities and nourished them. This can be called “complete virtue” (*quan de*).<sup>102</sup>

Here Liu used the ideal of complete virtue to designate the combination of cultural brilliance and political success that marked the model official. Complete virtue, according to Liu, was directly related to the connection between public and private life that *wen* provided.

Yang Sifu 楊嗣復 (783–848), who received his *jinshi* degree under Quan Deyu in 805,<sup>103</sup> also adopted the rhetoric. In his preface to Quan’s literary collection, he described Quan as “complete” (*quan*) from beginning to end in the way he undertook writing and the way he worked to “transform the world.”<sup>104</sup> It is even possible to find references to completeness in the writings of those with decidedly different approaches to intellectual culture than mainstream scholars. Both Lü Wen and Li Ao at times used similar phrases although they employed them in distinctive ways.<sup>105</sup>

What, then, was the literary manifestation of completeness? Or put another way, how could one tell that an author had achieved completeness? Completeness was an assimilative ideal; that is, it prized the accommodation of different literary qualities within a scholar’s oeuvre. Prizing accommodation led mid-Tang scholars (with notable exceptions,

we will see) to advocate balance and to avoid extremism. They availed themselves of solid classical precedent for this position.

The passage from the Classics that most impressed mid-Tang writers was *Analects* 6.18, which warned Confucius' disciples that, "when one's simplicity overcomes the refinement (*wen*), then one is boorish; when one's refinement overcomes the simplicity, then one is pedantic. Only when refinement and simplicity are balanced will one be a gentleman."<sup>106</sup> This maxim was well suited to the reform sensibility that criticized excessive ornament in literary writing, but it also suggested the enduring value (and necessity) of literary refinement (*wen*).<sup>107</sup> That literary reformers in the mid-eighth century were inspired by the passage is clear from a perusal of their surviving writings. Li Hua, for example, produced an essay entitled "On Simplicity and Refinement" that emphasized simplicity in the mid-Tang context, but argued that the two qualities had to alternate to overcome problems associated with extremes of either quality.<sup>108</sup> His friend Dugu Ji evaluated the writing of the Han and Wei dynasties using the paradigm as part of an argument about unifying (*bei*) both human feeling and beautiful expression.<sup>109</sup> Yan Zhenqing was more critical of literary history when he asserted that, in the succession of historical periods since the Zhou dynasty, none had been able to strike the proper balance between *zhi* and *wen*.<sup>110</sup>

Others also found the *Analects* paradigm instructive. Yu Shao 于邵 (fl. 785), for example, began his "Admonitions for the Literary Field" with the need for balance between the two.<sup>111</sup> Du Que's 杜確 (fl. 767) preface to the collected works of Cen Shen 岑參 (c. 715–770) alluded to *Analects* 6.18 to describe the balance that had been achieved during the Kaiyuan period.<sup>112</sup>

As with so many other ideas, Quan Deyu also summarized late-eighth-century thinking on balance in literature. He thus incorporated the *Analects* paradigm into his discussion of completeness. His "Drunken Explanation" implied a sophisticated interpretation of the passage that combined the idea of a balance between simplicity and ornament with the notions of self-restraint inherent in his description of good literature.<sup>113</sup>

While late-eighth- and early-ninth-century scholars developed the idea of literature as a balance between complementary qualities in canonical language, they also used terminology more specifically tailored to literary criticism, evaluating literature according to whether it could bring together *li* 理 and *wen*.<sup>114</sup> *Li* is surely more familiar in its Southern Song *Daoxue* 道學 usage as "inherent moral principles." When late-eighth-century scholars used this polarity, they associated *li* with the basic argument and logic of a given text. *Wen*, on the other

hand, represented the linguistic ornamentation that made it effective. Liang Su, for example, portrayed the decline of literature after the Han dynasty as a result of excessive concern with either one or the other pole:

If writers after [the Han] allowed *li* to triumph, then their *wen* became meager; if they allowed *wen* to triumph, then the *li* was eliminated. When the *li* was eliminated, then the wording became more luxuriant, and as it became more luxuriant, it became chaotic. When the *wen* became meager, then the ideas (*yi* 意) became more specious and as they became more specious, they became weaker.<sup>115</sup>

Quan Deyu followed Liang and adapted the polarity in his own work.<sup>116</sup> In his preface to the literary collection of the famous mid-Tang Taoist Wu Yun 吳筠 (d. 778), he sought a balance between language (*yan* 言) and underlying order (*li*).<sup>117</sup> Elsewhere he criticized post-Han writers for not achieving an appropriate balance between phrasing (*ci* 詞) and *li*.<sup>118</sup> In these examples, *wen* is a guarantee. The ability to express an argument with appropriate elegance certifies that it is legitimate.

What, however, does mastery of this balanced approach to literature have to do with the practical benefits associated with *wen*? Scholars during this period saw a direct connection between the ability to produce good literature and one's ability to contribute to society. Just as, in our own day, some believe passionately that the liberal arts and humanities are essential to the education of future leaders in a technological society, so many between 755 and 850 believed that prominent officials had to be skilled in balanced literary composition.

Quan Deyu best articulated the greater significance of completeness. His definition of "complete virtue" paralleled his definition of literary completeness. His "Opinion on the *Biographies of the Harsh Officials*" takes issue with Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (fl. 100 B.C.) characterization of the early Han official Zhi Du 鄧都 (fl. 157 B.C.) as harsh. It begins with a definition of "complete virtue": "Thus does the *Shijing* praise Zhongshan Fu 仲山甫: 'He was hard but not spit out. He was soft but not devoured.'<sup>119</sup> Therefore strength and indulgence were complete (*bei*) in his person. This is complete virtue (*quan de*)."<sup>120</sup> The essay asserts that Zhi was not harsh, but rather adopted strong or lenient measures as was appropriate to the situation. We are not stretching the text by associating this ideal with literary practice. Li Hua also alluded to this ode when describing Cui Mian in the preface to Cui's collected writings.<sup>121</sup>

Quan Deyu was also careful to explain why it was politically necessary to prize "complete virtue." In a congratulatory letter to his

father-in-law, Cui Zao 崔造 (737–787), when the latter became Grand Counselor in 786,<sup>122</sup> Quan described the impact of a man who has complete virtue. Such a man was able to bring together cultural, ethical, and political achievements. As a result, he “cleanses the senses of the world and returns the myriad things to their complete natures (*quan xing* 全性).”<sup>123</sup> If we step beyond this letter, which focuses particularly on political accomplishments, and take Quan’s various statements on completeness together, we can see the powerful coherence. Quan advocated giving government authority to those who had achieved *complete* virtue as identified by their *complete* literary style because they could return people to their *complete* natures.

Liu Yuxi’s preface for Linghu Chu gave a concrete illustration of how this worked. In addition to describing Linghu’s success in Bianzhou, Liu explained the power of his literary work:

Alas! When someone with a knack for *wen* wields the writing brush, wherever he goes is appropriate. When on the frontier, he arouses the troops’ expectations; when standing in court, he sets the various bureaucrats abuzz; and when inside the palace, he completes the influence and authority of great policies.<sup>124</sup>

One of the most important aspects of *wen* was its ability to vary with different occasions. Such an ability was absolutely necessary to a serving official, who would have to confront different situations throughout his career. This was especially relevant to a bureaucracy that relied on generalist officials who were actively suspicious of specialists. Such an official had to be able to adjust his actions to fit the bureaucratic “occasion.” The inevitability of change required varying forms. This is why Liu elsewhere could accept new poetic forms as long as they had the same impact as the *Shijing*.<sup>125</sup>

Liu’s “On Calligraphy” further developed the parallel between literary pursuits and the other aspects of the scholar’s life. In that essay, he suggested that a single-minded devotion to one particular policy or theory would lead to problems. One of his examples was the punishment of the Han classical scholars Zhao Wan 趙綰 (d. 139 B.C.) and Wang Zang 王臧 (d. 139 B.C.), who were persecuted by the Empress Dou 竇太后 (d. c. 130 B.C.) because of her one-sided esteem for Huang-Lao 黃老 learning.<sup>126</sup> “On Calligraphy” implied that the same logic applied to culture and morality.

The important point here is not simply that men had to adjust to changing circumstances. That was almost a truism during the mid-Tang. As one can see from Li Ao’s essay, “Inquiry on What Emperors Value,”

even those whose views differed dramatically from what I have labeled the mainstream literary approach agreed with that idea. In that essay, Li drew on an old tradition and asserted that the founding emperors of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties corrected the faults of their times by adopting different values: loyalty (*zhong* 忠), respect (*jing* 敬), or refinement (*wen*).<sup>127</sup> What made the Sage rulers of antiquity wise was their recognition of what was needed at the given time. All Sage rulers would have adopted the same measures given the same circumstances.<sup>128</sup> The important point is that mainstream scholars believed that *wen* itself, as manifested in the textual tradition, guided the literary man's adjustment to changing conditions and was therefore integral to appropriate flexibility.

### The Evolution of the Literary Mainstream

The danger with reconstructing an intellectual system is the tendency to overlook the degree to which that system was the product of historical evolution. Mainstream literary culture did not remain static. If we are to understand the continuing power of that orientation, we must understand its development.

The development of the Tang intellectual mainstream must first be understood in institutional terms. Its early history conforms quite closely to the process described in David McMullen's seminal study. McMullen argues persuasively that in the aftermath of the An Lushan rebellion, there was a marked change in the locus of intellectual vitality. Before the rebellion, most important scholarship was produced by scholars associated with the newly established Tang imperial court. Afterward private scholarship formed the backbone of scholarly production.<sup>129</sup> A more focused examination of the post-rebellion situation, however, reveals a slightly more complicated pattern.

Mainstream thinkers devoted themselves to defending the importance of the very center that was losing influence in the empire. The upsurge in demands for cultural (and therefore literary) reform that appeared during and immediately after the rebellion centered around officials who found themselves out of office and away from the political center (especially those who had had to flee to the southeast).<sup>130</sup> By the turn of the ninth century, scholars in the capital began to articulate reform ideas from the center itself. Quan Deyu is, perhaps, the most prominent example. Defenders of literary culture, in the course of the first two centuries of the Tang, moved from the center to the periphery and back to the center again. Nevertheless, it returned from its exile significantly changed.

New political and social conditions partly drove the change. As indicated above, the genesis of the essentially conservative mainstream lies in the early years of the Tang. The imperially commissioned projects, such as the compilation of the Standard Histories of the pre-Tang dynasties and Kong Yingda's *Rectified Meanings of the Five Classics*, represented the new dynasty's attempt to establish its legitimacy and draw the support of various powerful interests.<sup>131</sup> To make the case for Tang legitimacy entailed distinguishing it from the dynasties that preceded it. Advocating reform, especially cultural reform, was the clearest way of doing this. Although these reform ideals may often have been honored in the breach, nevertheless they provided the essential leavening for later mainstream ideology.<sup>132</sup>

When the series of rebellions in the late eighth century that began with the An Lushan rebellion shattered imperial institutions, it also set in motion important social changes. Not least was the challenge posed to the aristocrats of the Great Clans. In the post-rebellion world, many aristocrats had trouble securing government positions, a fact that naturally radicalized some of them.<sup>133</sup> By the turn of the ninth century, however, another group with a vested interest in conserving the Tang order more than bolstered the intellectual supporters of traditional Tang culture.

Peter Bol, drawing on Patricia Ebrey's work, has noted the potential implications of early Tang aristocratic ideology. Since that ideology justified the Great Clans' dominance of Chinese government and society by stressing their mastery of the cultural tradition, it left open the possibility that men could advance without Great Clan pedigree.<sup>134</sup> As it turns out, a number of significant representatives of the mid-Tang mainstream discussed above came from families with less prominent backgrounds. Three cases illustrate the phenomenon.

Quan Deyu is our first example. Although the sources force us to be somewhat cautious, it is clear that he was not the scion of a very prominent Great Clan. As do almost all medieval Chinese genealogies, the various sources trace the Quan family back far enough to strain credibility.<sup>135</sup> Although various sources do identify high-ranking ancestors, only from Quan's sixth-generation ancestor, Quan Rong 權榮 (?-?), who served the Sui dynasty, are there no further breaks in the recorded family line. These six ancestors did, however, hold respectable offices under the Tang, including a prefectship, a district magistracy, and an administrative position in the imperial military.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, we know that Quan's family was from Tianshui 天水, a region in the prefecture of Qinzhou 秦州 (in modern Gansu province). Tianshui was the home of a prominent Quan clan. It appears, for example, on the two tables of

“provincial notables” (*jun wang biao* 郡望表) that are extant.<sup>137</sup> When we look farther, however, it is clear that this Quan family was not part of Twitchett’s “super-aristocracy.”<sup>138</sup> The genealogical tables of grand counselors in the *New Tang History* list thirty-nine individuals from Quan Deyu’s family. Only Quan Deyu, who served Xianzong in that capacity, was a Grand Counselor.<sup>139</sup>

The contrast with the truly Great Clans is instructive. For example, the tables on the Langye Wang 琅琊王 clan trace unbroken lines for two different branches back to the Han dynasty. The family had also produced a grand counselor as early as the reign of Empress Wu 武后 (r. 690–705).<sup>140</sup> The genealogical tables for a single branch of the Hedong Liu 河東柳 clan alone list 125 individuals, and, although this branch contains only one grand counselor, many held offices above rank 5.<sup>141</sup>

Bai Juyi’s family background was even more obscure. Neither the Dunhuang nor the *Taiping huanyu ji* list contains a Bai family in Taiyuan 太原.<sup>142</sup> This obscurity has led to several controversial theories concerning Bai’s origins. Chen Yinke, for example, argued that Bai was non-Chinese, while Ota Tsugio believes that he came from a poor family (thus representing the breakdown of class lines).<sup>143</sup> The sources indicate, however, that Bai’s five immediate ancestors held office under the Tang.<sup>144</sup> Although the family produced only one grand counselor, the offices held did include respectable capital positions of the fifth rank and above.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, Bai’s family did have the resources to prepare Bai for the examinations,<sup>146</sup> and its ability to repeatedly place men in government indicates that it had mastered Tang official culture.

The final example is Liu Yuxi. The sources are unclear on the fundamental question of the family’s geographical base. Although Liu himself claimed that his family was descended from the Han Emperor Jing 景 (r. 156–141 B.C.) and was based in Zhongshan 中山, the *Old Tang History* locates Liu’s family in Pengcheng 彭城 (in modern Jiangsu province).<sup>147</sup> Unfortunately, the clan lists from Dunhuang and the *Taiping huanyu ji* do not help since they do list a prominent Liu clan in Pengcheng but not in Zhongshan. The *Yuanhe xingzuan* 元和姓纂, a ninth-century surname dictionary, traced the family to Zhongshan but associated Liu with a branch in Luling 廬陵 (in modern Jiangxi).<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, Liu Yuxi does not appear in the genealogical tables in the *New Tang History*; that is, as far as its compilers knew, no close relative of Liu had become a grand counselor.<sup>149</sup> Nevertheless, from his great-grandfather’s generation on, the record of Liu’s family in serving the Tang was a good one.<sup>150</sup> Their participation in Tang culture even included examinations, and Liu boasted that for generations his family had produced classical scholars (*ru*).<sup>151</sup> Liu Yuxi was, like Quan Deyu and Bai Juyi, a man who

had mastered Tang elite culture after his family had made it into the official ranks. Having “arrived,” they all had a vested interest in defending the system.

The dawn of the ninth century, however, saw the need for more than just a rehashing of earlier truisms. The serious challenges to the throne and the capital bureaucracy discussed in the prelude compelled literary thinkers to address problems more systematically. If we look at some of the issues discussed above chronologically, we can recognize the development. Quan Deyu developed and more fully articulated a series of ideals and values that had been championed by reformers who lived through the rebellion. A generation later Bai Juyi and Liu Yuxi explained more fully why Quan’s vision was possible. When he advocated “completeness,” Quan spoke eloquently about the correlation between literary characteristics and political impact. Bai and Liu explained the material base for that impact when they discussed the importance of the special endowment of *qi* that literary men draw on.

Besides providing a more coherent articulation of accepted values and ideals, this conservative position had another advantage over its rivals. The goal of being complete entailed, as we have seen, the ability to hold together complementary values (literary characteristics in the case of literature and moral values in the case of personal conduct). It was not an approach that forced its adherents to make definitive choices. Its power lay in its ability to accommodate the whole range of possible responses to contemporary conditions. This enabled it to absorb other approaches easily. Thus, even though Han Yu’s *guwen* movement challenged the status quo directly, mainstream thinkers co-opted much of the rhetoric of “returning to antiquity” (*fu gu*), which was after all a long-standing ideal. Similarly, mainstream thinkers continued to oppose excessively ornate language and to call for greater moral substance in literature and other cultural pursuits. Thus, Bai Juyi could compose a poem for Zhang Ji 張籍 (c. 768–c. 830), an important *guwen* figure, which praised the moral impact of Zhang’s poetry and lamented that he remained unemployed.<sup>152</sup>

Before leaving this consideration of literary theory, one last issue requires discussion: literary style. The reluctance of mainstream literary thinkers to take exclusive positions also influenced their approach to questions of style. Despite their condemnation of excessively flowery language, they were quite comfortable with conventional style. They recognized the persuasive power of beauty. Dugu Ji could therefore defend the literary achievements and cumulative contributions of the Six Dynasties period in the same breath that he advocated a dignified balance between refinement (*wen*) and simplicity (*zhi*).<sup>153</sup> Quan Deyu’s own style



was quite ornate, and he so excelled at that style that he served almost nine years drafting imperial documents.<sup>154</sup> Bai Juyi, on the other hand, was comfortable in both the conventional and the so-called new ancient style. His collected works divide his imperial proclamations according to whether they were written in “ancient” or “modern” style.<sup>155</sup>

The attitude toward conventional style is also evident in discussions concerning novelty and innovation. As we will see in chapter 5, the pioneers of *guwen* were consistent in their alienation from contemporary intellectual culture. They therefore sought to distance themselves from the manifestations of that culture. Although all, as a result of their shared education, could and did use conventional style when necessary, their alienation led some to defend novelty and even strangeness (*qi* 奇) in their theoretical statements. Li Ao's letter to Zhu Zaiyan 朱載言 (fl. 801) emphasized creating ideas (*chuang yi* 創意) and fashioning words (*zao yan* 造言) and thus justified an unfashionable style in the pursuit of learning from antiquity.<sup>156</sup> Huangfu Shi 皇甫湜 (c. 777–c. 835) was an even more outspoken advocate of innovation. He defended the literary strangeness of lofty works.<sup>157</sup> Elsewhere he criticized Quan Deyu for being too conventionally refined and not sufficiently novel.<sup>158</sup> As we would expect from their ability to incorporate more conventional styles into their work, mainstream intellectuals were certainly willing to reject novelty for its own sake. The best example is a letter Pei Du wrote to Li Ao. In it, Pei argues that successful *wen* does not result from consciously striving to make it unusual. Instead, legitimate novelty follows from appropriate intentions.<sup>159</sup>

### Conclusion

The above discussion reveals that there was a widely shared understanding of the nature and role of literary culture that developed in the century following the An Lushan rebellion. Its roots stretched back to the early years of the dynasty. Scholars such as Li Hua, Dugu Ji, and Yan Zhenqing drew on those roots as they confronted the disaster of the rebellion. The next generation (represented by Quan Deyu) began the process of articulating the way this traditional, literary approach would respond to late-eighth- and early-ninth-century political problems. The process of systematization was carried even farther in the next generation, as our consideration of the work of Bai Juyi and Liu Yuxi demonstrates.

Scholars of this persuasion believed that only by refocusing political power around men with literary skills could the rampant disorder of the age be arrested. This was because literary men activated the shared

endowment (*qi*) of human beings via their literary work. Because they were trained to balance complementary values, they were able to draw on the accumulated cultural experience as they responded to changing circumstances. The fact that they did not feel the need to make final choices meant that there was an inherent flexibility in the approach.

By the turn of the ninth century, calls for literary reform, criticism of excessively ornate language, and advocacy of moral seriousness had all become commonplace. They should not therefore be the basis for distinguishing between various intellectual alternatives. As it turns out, the best way to distinguish between the mainstream literary approach and more radical alternatives such as the *guwen* movement is to examine their approaches to learning and the tradition. It is to that subject that we turn now.