The Uses of Tradition

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Outline

I. Pre-modern era
   1) Overview: “this culture of ours”
   2) example: poetry

II. Modern era
   1) Adam Smith in Archaic Prose?
   2) “Do Not Read Any Chinese Books”

III. Contemporary era
   1) Overview: 1949-1990s
   2) the Beidao controversy
   3) the Gao Xingjian controversy
Key word: 文

- modern definition: writing, literary composition, essay, refined, civilized, civil
- etymology: (elegant) pattern, tattoo (Bronze age: man w/ taboo on chest)
- human patterning (vs. heavenly or earthly patterning)
Oracle-bone script  Bronze script  Small Seal Script
the written language

– 50,000 discrete units – characters – that convey sound and meaning
– 1000 basic literacy, 4000 full literacy
– pictographic 🎁, ideographic 上 下
logographic (monosyllabic)
morphosyllabic: each unit is one syllable but the lang. has words of various syllabic length
– high prestige of the script
Civil Service Examination

- 178 BCE - 1905
- Literary composition the mark of distinction, membership in the elite ruling class
- Intimate link between fine writing and moral/political concerns
Poetry

1) canonical status
2) high moral purpose
3) part of the civil service examination
“Poetry expresses the heart’s wishes in words.”
--- Sage Emperor Shun

“If you do not study *Poetry*, you will not be able to converse.”
--- Confucius
“The Three Hundred Poems may be summed up in one phrase: ‘No evil thoughts.’”

--- Confucius
The peach tree budding and tender.
  Vivid and bright its flowers.
  This girl is going to be married,
  And fit for her chamber and house.

The peach tree budding and tender,
  Quite large its fruit.
  This girl is going to be married,
  And fit for her house and chamber.

The peach tree budding and tender,
  Its leaves luxuriant and lush.
  This girl is going to be married,
  And fits with all in the family.
Poetry: *shi*

- full flowering in Tang dynasty (618-907)
- regular meter (5 or 7 syllables per line)
- highly condensed (40 or 56 words)
- imagistic density
- parallelism
- regulated word choice, structure, syntax and tones
Climbing Crane Tower
-- by Wang Zhihuan (688-742)

White sun rests on mountains – and is gone
Yellow River enters sea - and flows on
If you want to see a further thousand miles:
Climb another story in the tower.

白日依山盡，
黃河入海流。
欲窮千里目，
更上一層樓。
Poetry: *ci*

*ci* 詞 (song lyric)

- words to songs, origin in the cosmopolitan culture of the Silk Roads of central Asia (9-11thc)
- less unified in structure, less parallelism
- shifting between imagistic presentation and quotation of speech
虞美人
- 李煜

春花秋月何時了，
往事知多少？
小樓昨夜又東風，
故國不堪回首月明中。

雕欄玉砌應猶在，
只是朱顏改。
問君能有幾多愁，
恰似一江春水向東流。
Ci poem: To the Tune ‘The Beautiful Lady Yu’
by Li Yu (937-978)

When will the last flower fall, the last moon fade?
So many sorrows lie behind.
Again last night the east wind filled my room –
O gaze not on the lost kingdom under this bright moon.

Still in her light my palace gleams as jade,
-- It’s only the youthful faces that have changed.
I ask you, how much sorrow can there be?
Just as much as a river full of spring waters, flowing east.
Poetry: *qu* 曲 (songs)

- words to songs, origin in Jurchen and other northern cultures
- full bloom under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368)
- northern vernacular, vigorously colloquial
“Not Giving In to Old Age”
- Guan Hanqing (ca. 1220-ca. 1307)

I am a jingling tingling bronze bean that remains hard after being steamed, raw after being stewed, that bounces under a big hammer and will not pop when being baked.

我是個蒸不爛、煮不熟、捶不扁、炒不爆、響噹噹一粒
銅豌豆
Observation:

– elite Tradition constantly influenced by popular traditions
– popular culture absorbed by literati practitioners
– poetry collections (of shi, ci or qu) functioning as main instrument of maintaining cultural orthodoxy
– poetry collections also containing oppositional poetics, asserting that what they are including represents an important, and desirable contrast to the immediate past (whether because it is old or because it is new. Often, of course, what makes the values "new" is their recuperation of the "old.")
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The late Qing to early Republic era (1840s -1910s)

- Qing (1644-1911), Manchu rule, adoption of Confucianism, the civil service examination
- the late Qing, internal (Taiping 1851-1864) and external (Opium Wars 1840s) strife;
- literati-intellectuals’ responses
  1) first calling for studying western knowledge so as to gain the secrets of national wealth and power (1860s – 98),
  2) then for a revamp of the political system (1898-1911),
  3) a gradual critique and then a complete overhaul of traditional culture (1915 -).
Proper Literary Medium for Translation

1) Liang Qichao - the new style
"[interlarding] colloquialism, verses and foreign expressions fairly frequently, letting [the] pen flow freely and without constraint."

2) Yan Fu and Lin Su - the Archaic Prose
**Toncheng Archaic Prose**

- major literary school of the Qing dynasty
- founded in the early 18th century
- sought to revive the prose style of the Tang and Song dynasty classicists (Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan of 8-9\textsuperscript{th} c, Ouyang Xiu and Su Shi of 11\textsuperscript{th} c.) who in their turn were attempting a Renewal of Antiquity.
- literary revival + Confucian revival
- ideal style emphasizes clarity, balance and restraint
- principal issue: the dialogical relationship between dao and its formal manifestation in *wen* or letters
Why Adam Smith in archaic Chinese

“If one were to use popular vernacular so that it would be accessible to ignorant country bumpkins, that to the literary world is not revolution but butchering. My translation is meant for those who have steeped themselves in the classical tradition. For those people whose eyes have never glanced at the ancient pages, and then proceed to criticize my translation, the fault is with the reader, not the translator.”

-- Yan Fu’s letter to Liang Qichao
The May-Fourth Movement

- student demonstrations in Beijing on May 4, 1919, protesting the Chinese government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles, especially the Shandong Problem
The New Culture Movement

• mid 1910s - 1920s
• revolt against Confucianism
• demand for
  1) democracy and science
  2) vernacular literature
  3) individual freedom and women's liberation
Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936)

- influential during and after the May Fourth
- highly acclaimed by the Communist regime after 1949
“Madman’s Diary” - Lu Xun

Everything requires careful consideration if one is to understand it. In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology, and scrawled all over each page are the words: "Virtue and Morality." Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night, until I began to see words between the lines, the whole book being filled with the two words "Eat people."

With the weight of four thousand years of cannibalism bearing down upon me, even if I was once innocent how can I now face real humans?
“…contracted a chill while singing and roistering; saw an abyss in heaven. In all eyes saw nothing; in hopelessness found salvation…

There is a wandering spirit which takes the form of a serpent with poisonous fangs. Instead of biting others, it bites itself, and so it perishes…

…begone!”
…I tore out my heart to eat it, wanting to know its true taste. But the pain was so agonizing, how could I tell its taste?...

… when the pain subsided I savoured the heart slowly. But since by then it was stale, how could I know its true taste?...

Answer me. Or, begone!...
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Mao’s 1942 Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and the Arts

1) lit. and art indicative of class origin and ideology
2) the command that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy
3) writers and artists’ attitude and audience
   - need re-education to change their class stand.
Basic time-line

• 1956 – “Hundred flowers movement”
• 1957 – Anti-rightist campaign
• 1958 – the Great Leap Forward
• 1966-76 – Cultural Revolution
• 1978-81 – Democracy Wall
• 1983 – Anti-spiritual pollution Campaign
• 1986 – Anti-bourgeois liberalization Campaign
• 1989 April-June – Democracy movement
• 1990s - market economy
Literary Landmarks

- Scar Literature
- Roots-searching (Acheng)
- Avant-garde (Can Xue, Gao Xingjian)
- Misty Poetry (Beidao)
- Private writing (Lin Bai), Body-writing (Wei Hui), Lower-body writing (Poetry Vagabond web lit.)
- The city – recreation of place/history (Wang Anyi)
- Gao Xingjian: *Soul Mountain* winning 2000 Nobel prize
“The Answer” (1976) - Beidao

Debasement is the passport of the base,
Nobility is the epitaph of the noble.
Look at the gold-plated sky
Filled with the drifting rippled reflections of the dead.
The Ice Age is over,
Why then are there ice peaks everywhere?
The Cape of Good Horn has already been discovered,
Why then do a thousand sails compete on a Dead Sea?
Continued...

I’ll tell you, world,

*I do not believe!*

If a thousand challengers already lie under your feet,

Count me number one thousand and one.

I do not believe that the sky is blue;

I do not believe in the echoes of thunder;

I do not believe that dreams are false;

    I do not believe that death brings no recompense.
Gao Xingjian 高行健 (1940 - )

- novelist, playwright, critic, translator, screenwriter, director, painter
- Citizenship: China (1949-1996), France (since 1997)
- Nobel Prize in literature, 2000
- Works: *Bus Stop*, 1983
  *Wild Men*, 1985
  *Soul Mountain*, 1989
  *One Man’s Bible*, 1998
Gao Xingjian:

“A writer does not speak as the spokesperson of the people or as the embodiment of righteousness. His voice is inevitably weak, but it is precisely this voice of the individual that is more authentic.”

“A fragile individual, a solitary writer confronted by society and voicing his opinions—I believe this is the nature of literature. From ancient times to the present, from China to foreign countries, from the East to the West, the nature of literature has not changed that much. What is important to a writer is transcendence (超脱 chaotuo), to create something anew rather than to live by selling pieces of the ancestors’ heritage.”

“Once separated from the so-called land of my ancestry, I gained distance and started writing with a more sober mind (冷静 lengjing).