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Chinese Literature in
Transition from Antiquity
to the Middle Ages

Donald Holzman

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Transition from Antiquity
to the Middle Ages

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The articles in this volume, as in all others in the Collected Studies Series, have not been given a new, continuous pagination. In order to avoid confusion, and to facilitate their use where these same studies have been referred to elsewhere, the original pagination has been maintained wherever possible.

Each article has been given a Roman number in order of appearance, as listed in the Contents. This number is repeated on each page and is quoted in the index entries.

Corrections noted in the Addenda and Corrigenda have been marked by an asterisk in the margin corresponding to the relevant text to be amended.

PREFACE

I have chosen the articles that make up this first Variorum volume of my writings because they all illustrate, to a greater or lesser degree, problems that have intrigued me since I first endeavored to write about Chinese history: How are we to account for the tremendous changes in the attitudes towards the world and towards themselves that can be seen in the works of Chinese writers in the early centuries of the Christian era? How does the massive conversion to Buddhism of such a large part of the population and the widespread development of Daoist religion correspond to the conversion of the West to Christianity? Are these conversions to new religions in the place of the ancient imperial religion in China similar to developments in the Mediterranean world? Can we with any assurance speak of the gradual evolution of China from an "Antiquity" to a "Middle Age"? In one way or another, most of the articles and books I have written attempt to cast some small light on concrete examples of how the Chinese altered their view of the world and themselves. I have attempted to show that, in the changes in their attitudes towards literature and in their appreciation of landscape, during the Han and the first four centuries of the Christian era, we can see signs of a turning inward and the birth of new forms of spirituality that can truly be considered akin to those that also arose in the West during the same period.

The first two articles are devoted mainly to a study of two aspects of Confucius's philosophy. The first concerns the "conversational tradition" of philosophical discourse that he originated and that became a hallmark of Chinese philosophical disquisition. In this article I emphasize the fact that the disciples who noted Confucius's sayings in their collection of his "Conversations" (the *Lunyu*, usually translated as "Analects") took great pains in reproducing the Master's every syllable, almost his hemming and hawing. The *Lunyu* is seen as the first of a long series of philosophical works throughout history in which the philosopher's ideas, rather than being cut and dried theories, are shown as embodied in actual conversations that attempt to catch his thoughts as they were elaborated in the context of his life. The article was

abridged in *Philosophy Today* 2 (Carthagen, Ohio, 1958), 162-165.

In the second article I discuss Confucius's attitude to literature, in particular the way he, following the usage of his time, distorts and re-interprets the verses of the "Canon of Poetry" (the *Shijing*) so that they can be used to give canonical authority to his ideas. I attempt to show that his attitude was not the result of a lack of feeling for art nor for the artistic aspects of literature, but that in his work he was interested only in moral and political philosophy and that such an attitude towards literature was one that remained prevalent throughout Antiquity, changing only in the third century AD (as in the works discussed in the fifth article in this volume). This second article was translated and published twice into Chinese, in *Gudian wenxue zhishi* 古典文學知識 3 (Nanking, 1987), 128-135, and in *Wenyi lilun yanjiu* 文藝理論研究 2 (Shanghai, 1988), 91-97.

The third article studies the origins of the pentasyllabic line, the preferred verse form of the Early Medieval poets. I have translated all the authentically dated poems in this form that I was able to find. I begin with the earliest, a short song by an imprisoned imperial concubine that dates to 195 BC, and end with three poems attributed to a man who lived during the second half of the second century AD. All of the poems are concerned with subjects related to politics; only the last, dated to the end of the Han and written by a man who, separated from his wife while on a mission to the provincial capital, introduces a note of private life and private emotions into his writing. I believe that this illustrates the almost exclusive interest in the place of man in society of the ancient Chinese writers to the detriment of all other aspects of life. In an article in Chinese on the origin of pentasyllabic poetry published in the Japanese journal *Chûgoku bungaku hô* 中國文學報 36 (Kyoto, 1985), 7-14, the Chinese scholar Wu Shichang 吳世昌 tries to prove that this verse form originated in "women's literature". In fact the earliest poem in the form was written by a woman (and Wu Shichang quotes it) and a certain number of those that follow it also concern women. I believe this could be attributed to the fact that women in ancient China represented a facet of life quite distant from politics and that it was probable that if they wrote at all, that they used a popular verse form not practiced by the educated; it is quite possible that their appearance, as authors or subjects of the earliest verse in this form, is not gratuitous. But Wu Shichang accepts any poetry that he thinks proves his thesis, however tenuous its claim to authenticity may be, and he ignores the rest. His refusal to grant masculinity to the author of one of the earliest of poems because of the fact that he was a eunuch, makes one wonder if his

article was intended as a joke.

Ruan Ji (210-263), like most of the poets who wrote after the fall of the Han, used the pentasyllabic line in his most important works, but thirteen poems in tetrasyllabic lines are also attributed to him; ten of these were thought to be lost until they were re-published in 1983 and again in 1984. My fourth article concerns the authenticity of these ten poems. After a discussion of the little that is known of their textual history and after a translation of the ten poems as published in the eighties, I conclude that, in spite of showing a style quite in keeping with contemporary third-century verse, these poems have little in common with the attitudes and thoughts of Ruan Ji as shown in his other works and that, if indeed they are authentic (which I doubt), then they must have been written very early on in his career. As far as I know, no Chinese nor Japanese scholars have led us to doubt the authenticity of these works. The only other work I have seen on the subject, Numaguchi Masaru 沼口勝, "Gen Seki no shigon 'Eikaishi' ni tsuite", in *Nihon Chûgoku gakkai hô* 日本中國學會報 38 (Tokyo, 1986), 103-119, accepts their authenticity without demur.

The "literary criticism of the third century AD" that is the subject of my fifth article was written by two brothers, the future emperor of the Wei dynasty, Cao Pi, and his younger full brother, Cao Zhi. The letters of the brothers to friends and the essay by Cao Pi are milestones in the history of literature in China for they are the earliest works that speak of literature for itself, that is, as a creation valid for what it says about the life of the author independent of what it tells us about his political career or about his views on Confucian morality. It is probably not a coincidence that these two young men were themselves close to the center of power, that, at the time they were written, they both thought they had a chance of becoming the next emperor of China for, even as late as the third century, Confucian morality saw to it that only works useful for the survival of the state should be preserved and even works whose attitude towards literature was as ambivalent as those studied here would be considered valid only if they were the expression of men very close indeed to the center of political life. But the timid "declaration of independence" for literature as Cao Pi's essay has been called really does show us that "ancient" Confucian prejudices were being challenged at the beginning of the third century and it gives us a clear sign that they would be strongly modified if not completely supplanted before the end of the century.

The final essay is actually a small book made up of lectures given in the Hsin Chu Bank Endowed Lecture Series on Thought and Culture at the

National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan, early in 1995. The book was only printed in small numbers and copies were, for the most part, stacked away in cupboards with little attempt made at distribution; I am happy to have the opportunity of re-printing it here with some corrections. Although the main theme of the book is “the birth of landscape poetry”, I am in fact attempting to show in greater detail and with more examples the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages that I mention again and again in most of the the previous articles in this volume. The essay is a fitting conclusion to the previous articles and I hope it will give the reader a clearer idea of my thoughts on this problem than may have been derived from the hints I give here and there in my earlier works.

It was from my reading of Chinese landscape poetry that I was first struck by differences in views of the world that the Chinese held during what I call their “Antiquity” and during what I call their “Middle Ages”; the differences in attitude towards landscape seemed to me to be particularly telling. Ever since I first read Chinese landscape poetry of the Tang dynasty in translation, many years ago, I have been struck by the way the Tang poets savoured nature, how they seemed to relish it as one relishes a living thing. They seemed to delight in the forests and mountains that they described and to find in them a life independent of the life of men; nature seemed in their verse to be imbued with a spirit of its own, and I felt that I had re-discovered, in reading their works, the awe and delight I had previously discovered myself when I had walked in the forests and when I had appreciated a landscape. I felt instinctively that I (and Wordsworth!) shared the Chinese poets’ taste for nature and that such a taste must be universal. When I seriously began to study earlier pre-Tang literature in the original Chinese, I was surprised not to find the delight that I had found in the Tang poets’ verse, surprised and disappointed. As I studied the earlier periods and began to specialize in third-century poetry this discrepancy stayed in the back of my mind and I almost unconsciously strove to discover what could have happened in history to bring about such a great change in attitude and when that change could have taken place. This essay is my written attempt to interpret the problem of this discrepancy and to answer the queries that it raises. I have also attempted to compare the appreciation of landscape in China and in the West in an article that has appeared in Chinese, “Zhongshiji Zhongguo yu zhongshiji Ouzhou shanshui xinshang zhi bijiao” 中世紀中國與中世紀歐洲山水欣賞之比較, *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu tongxun* 中國文哲研究通訊 5/4 (Nangang, Taiwan, 1995), pp. 1- 18.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Françoise Aubin whose initiative led to the publication of this volume and of its sister-volume (forthcoming); Sandy Koffler who found many errors in the original texts that escaped my attention; Miss Celia Hoare for helping me to clarify an embarrassing number of obscure sentences in this Preface; and finally John Smedley for his friendly aid in seeing the two volumes through to publication.

DONALD HOLZMAN

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The Conversational Tradition in Chinese Philosophy

Die Gottheit aber ist wirksam im Lebendigen, aber nicht im Toten; sie ist im Werdenden und sich Verwandelnden, aber nicht im Gewordenen und Erstarrten. Deshalb hat auch die Vernunft in ihrer Tendenz zum Göttlichen es nur mit dem Werdenden, Lebendigen zu tun . . . (Eckermann, Gespräche mit Goethe, 13 February 1829.)

THE PROBLEM of this paper is to discuss one formal aspect of Chinese philosophy that has appeared and reappeared in each of the great ages of Chinese intellectual history: the Philosophical Conversation. I shall try to show first what I mean by Philosophical Conversation and how it differs from the Philosophical Dialogue so familiar in the West. I will then pass quickly in review three of the most important manifestations of the conversational form in China, the *Lun-yü* 論語, the *Shih-shuo hsinyü* 世說新語, and the *Sayings* of the Ch'an masters, attempting to define its essence and discover why it has had such a widespread and persistent appeal to the Chinese philosopher. Finally, once I have distilled this essential Chinese aspect of the Philosophical Conversation from its millennial history, perhaps I will be able to relate it, in a very general way, to the structure of the Chinese language.

When we learn, as beginners in Chinese philosophy, that the only remaining authentic records of the greatest sage of that tradition were collected after his death in a book that is entitled "Conversations" (the *Lun-yü*), we are not really very surprised, for, however slight our knowledge of Greek philosophy may be, we know that the best record we have of the great sage of that tradition is found in the "Conversations" (*Dialogues*) written after his death by his most brilliant disciple, Plato. That the thought of the two greatest sages of the Greek and Chinese traditions are represented by conversations is another of the great number of illustrations of the universality of the human mind. And if Socrates and Confucius (551–479 B.C.) do not seem sufficient evidence, we might add, without leaving the realm of the

greatest thinkers in different traditions, the Conversations of the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* between Yājñavalkya and his wife and between Naciketas and Yama in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. But I think it will not be difficult to show that the Chinese conversations differ from their Greek and Indian counterparts.

Plato uses the dialogue primarily because it is for him the living embodiment of his philosophical method, the dialectic; indeed, the two words are synonymous in Greek. For Plato, dialectic was the science which enabled him to rise from concrete, individual objects to more and more generalized concepts until he reached the most abstract, the most formal, which was the Idea or Form of the object or quality under consideration. One of the most striking cases is his climb from particular examples of beauty to the principle of Form of beauty.¹ This philosophical method is peculiar to Plato, and, in fact, the dialogue used as a living form, and not simply an artistic framework for a philosophical essay, is born and dies with Plato. The dialogue form is not a living tradition in the West.

In China, as is to be expected, the dialogue form was never used for dialectic in the purely Platonic sense. But neither can it be considered to have been used in a perfectly uniform way. Different philosophers in different periods have used the dialogue or conversational form to suit their own particular philosophies. I am interested here in only one conversational tradition that I believe can be traced from the beginning to modern times. I will deliberately leave aside those forms of the dialogue widely practiced in ancient times which come closest to the dialectical method and which can be found in such authors as Mo-tzū^{1a} and the Logicians and in many others, Taoists and Confucianists, interspersed with the tradition to be discussed.

As already suggested, the first great monument of Chinese philosophy is also the first link of the chain of the conversational tradition. The *Conversations* (or *Analects* as they are commonly, but improperly, called after Legge's translation) of Confucius are the source of the tradition and one of its most perfect examples. It will show us at the outset what I mean by the conversational tradition, and, by examining the *Lun-yü* in its tradition, we will see that many of its most striking elements are not archaisms, as we might expect because of its early date, but are really important parts of its structure. A clear understanding of the spirit of the conversational form will help us, moreover, toward a more profound and complete appreciation of the sayings of Confucius.

¹ *Symposium* 211 and elsewhere.

^{1a} The author's style of transliteration is followed throughout this article.—ED.

What, then, are the peculiarities of the *Lun-yü*? As is well known, it is composed of twenty books, each containing twenty or more short chapters. These chapters tell us something about the life or thoughts of Confucius or his disciples. They are not all conversations, but (aside from Book X) almost without exception they refer to sayings of the earliest Confucians, being preceded by the words "The Master said . . ." (子曰), when the speaker is Confucius himself, or "So and So said . . .", when the speaker is one of Confucius' followers. They are thus a record of spoken words, whether in conversations or not, and certain peculiarities of style prove clearly that the object of the recorder or recorders of the words has been to preserve as much as the recalcitrant Chinese character was willing to preserve of the colloquial flavor of the original speech. The recorders have gone so far as to include the very hemming and hawing of actual conversation in their texts, with their *i's*! 矣 and *i-i's*! 已矣 and *hu-tsa'i's*! 乎哉. Another peculiarity of these *Conversations* (or sayings) is that they are usually very short—sometimes not more than a few words, but in any case seldom more than a few sentences. These few remarks show clearly that the authors of the *Conversations* are not interested in dialectic or in dialogues in the Platonic sense, nor in any artistic usages of the form as developed in the West after Plato. In fact, the aim of the authors seems fairly clear already: we have in the short, intensely idiomatic sayings of the *Conversations* an attempt to capture the living speech of Confucius, the implication being that it was there that lay the real meaning of his philosophy and not in any perhaps clearer and more systematic exposition of his thought. A few examples will explain what is meant.

In the *Conversations*, Confucius several times hints that, contrary to what I have just stated, he has what we may take to be a system for his philosophy. In IV. 15, for example, we read:

The Master said, "Shen! My Way has a single (thread) that runs right through it." Tsêng-tzû replied, "Yes." When the Master had gone out, the disciples asked, "What did he mean?" Tsêng-tzû said, "The Master's Way is simply this: loyalty, consideration."²

If this is the case, we might suspect that the Master could arrange a systematic exposition of his doctrine, an exposition that might be done better in a prose analysis than in these short, choppy conversations. Such is not the case, however. (Notice that it is not the Master himself who describes his Way, but his disciple Tsêng-tzû.) Nowhere do we get an extended analysis of what Confucius considers to be the "thread" or the "unifying

² Cf. Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1938), p. 105.

basis" of his philosophy. On the contrary, his conversations on this matter conform closely to what I have been trying to describe. In XII. 3 it is a question of goodness (*jén* 仁) which is something close to the "unifying basis" of his thought. His "definition" is a pun:

Ssü-ma Niu asked about Goodness (*jén*). The Master said, "The Good (*jén*) man is chary (*jén*) of his words." Ssü-ma Niu said, "Is *that* what is meant by Goodness, —to be chary of your words?" The Master said, "When something is difficult to do, can one not be chary of speaking about it?"³

This short conversation is typical of most of those in the *Conversations*: Confucius replies to Ssü-ma Niu's general question with a particular, concrete answer, one which certainly cannot be considered to be a definition of goodness. In fact, he never quite gives a definition or an abstraction of goodness; all his replies concern different concrete facets, immanent in specific vital contexts, of this supreme virtue. And that is why the conversation is peculiarly well-adapted to his philosophy: it is in the discussion of particular facts of human existence that Confucius, and after him the philosophers in the conversational tradition, produce their particular insights, short, incisive stabs, into the human condition. To organize his insights into a system would be to devitalize them; therefore his disciples have tried to keep them as close to their original, particular, concrete form as possible and have preserved these *Conversations* or sayings on different particular occasions. The same can be said for all the later philosophers in the conversational tradition. And the fact that this can be said for later philosophers is important: it shows that the form of the *Conversations* is not an archaism, the fumbling attempt of the first Chinese philosophers to put their ideas, pell-mell, into some sort of order, but is an integral part of Confucius' thought, and, indeed, an important clue to the character of Chinese thought in general.

It is only in the *Conversations* of Confucius and perhaps in Mencius during the period of the philosophers that we get almost an entire work devoted to these short conversations or sayings; in the later thinkers of the period, we get either more extended, dialectical conversations, or discussions, or even, in the case of Hsün-tzŭ and others, short essays. Are we perhaps wrong, then, in dismissing the possibility of archaism as the main reason for Confucius' choice of a form? Are not the comparable conversations in later philosophers simply traditionalistic anachronisms? In the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.—A.D. 220), moreover, we get almost no "conversational" philosophers: all effort is devoted to systematic encyclopaedism

³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.