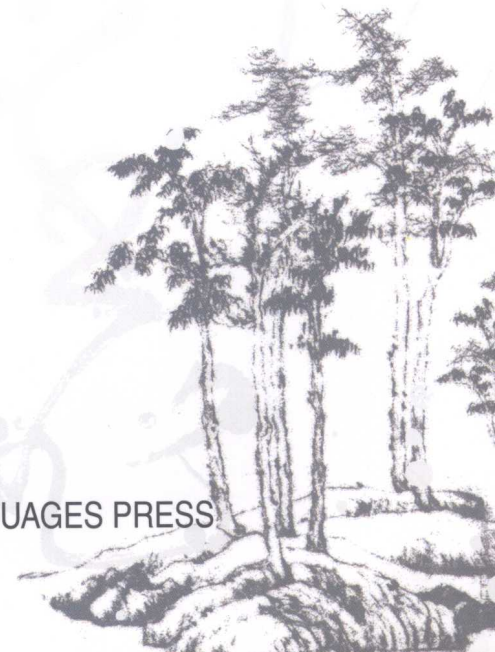
SPIRIT OF CHINESE POETICS

Wang Keping



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Foreword

Poetry plays an important role in Chinese culture during its entire history. *The Book of Poetry* (*Shi jing*), for example, is ranked the first among the Six Classics of Confucianism.[1] For so long a time in antiquity it was employed as a textbook for primary schooling and art education as well. Even many centuries later it still served as a fountainhead of inspiration for poets, such as those in Tang and Song Dynasties. Now, a large amount of its content is not as popular as it used to be due to the bumper harvest of flourishing Tang poems and the Song *ci* lyrics. Yet, the tradition of poetry reading and recitation continues all the way through. Up till today, most of the Chinese children commence their early learning with the Tang poems because they are short, musical, vivid and picturesque, and above all, much easier to memorize and apprehend. Hence, you can ask almost every kid you encounter in China to recite a couple of poems providing he or she speaks the native language or standard Chinese properly.

Parallel to the rich output of poetry are the rich sources concerning the *techne* of poetic composition and appreciation. These sources are called *shihua* qua discourse on poetry or *cihua*

1 The Six Classics of Confucianism are called "*Liu Jing*" or "*Liu Yi*" in Chinese, including *The Book of Poetry* (*Shi jing*), *The Book of History* (*Shu jing*), *The Book of Rites* (*Li jing*), *The Book of Music* (*Yue jing*), *The Book of Changes* (*Yi jing*), and *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chun qiu*). They used to be the textbooks of general education for a long time in Chinese history.

qua discourse on *ci* lyrics. Since poetry, music and dance or pantomime used to be intermingled in that they formed a kind of trinity, what is discussed in one domain often trespasses on the provinces of other genres. Such a phenomenon is taken for granted because there are no fast rules to keep them apart in their own boundaries. That is why the mechanics of poetic creation can be also applied to the making of other arts. This being the case, an inquiry into the spirit of Chinese poetics, in particular, can be considered an inquiry into the spirit of Chinese arts in general.

Frankly speaking, this book is by no means a whole picture. It simply reflects a sight of some glimmering leaves from the huge forest of Chinese poetic discourses, say, it is intended to expose part of the vista for the sake of the potential travelers who may be willing to venture into its far-reaching background. In fact, this book is based on eight papers delivered at the conferences held at home and abroad. It focuses on the fundamentals of Chinese poetics, covering such themes as Confucius' preoccupation with poetry education, a comparative study of ancient music in China and Greece, Mozi and Xunzi on the functions of music, Liu Xie's critique of poetic styles, Zhu Xi's moralistic view of poetry, a reconsideration of poetic wisdom and *Sūnyatā* as beauty in Zen enlightenment, Wang Guowei's aesthetic criticism of transculturality, and Lu Xun's promotion of sublime poetics saturated with revolutionary enthusiasm.

When these essays are made into such a book form, they seem to follow a chronological line ranging from Confucius in the ancient times down to Lu Xun in the modern period. As is observed from the texts provided, Confucius' notion of poetry points to the past heritage whereas Lu Xun's poetics of *māratic* type directs towards the future reform. Between these two poles

there exists a historical space of tension, interaction, change, progression and even transformation. It is especially so when it comes to Wang Guowei's aesthetic criticism that marks a new start of Chinese modern poetics and aesthetics in one sense, and also features a transcultural approach to creative synthesis in the other sense.

I owe a great deal to Dr. Nicholas Bunnin who encourages me to bring forth the cultural dimension of Chinese poetics and philosophy alike simply because it is missing by and large in the Western counterpart. On this occasion, I would also like to extend my gratitude to Miss Fu Yao and her colleagues from the Foreign Language Press for their professional patience and prudence. Without all this encouragement and help, the book in your hand could not have come into its present shape, I believe.

Wang Keping
Beijing, 2008

Chapter 1

A Manifold Expectation of Poetry[1]

"His yearning grows so strong,
He cannot fall asleep,
But tosses all night long,
So deep in love, so deep!..."

In his Analects *(Lun yu)*, Confucius (551-479 BC) places equal emphasis on poetry, rites and music in terms of personal cultivation *(xiu shen)*. As is known from history, poetry used to be extremely popular in ancient China for its social, aesthetic and moral import. Its popularity was, so to speak, largely due to the fact that it would serve as a threefold form of social, aesthetic and moral discourse. It is therefore assumed that Confucius' curriculum for poetry education was generally grounded on the considerations of this trinity with regard to the principle of "gentle and kind" character training *(wen rou dun hou)*.

1. Poetry as a Social Discourse

In ancient China, poetry (i.e., songs, lyrics, odes, epics and hymns in general) was widely employed on such important occasions as feasting and sacrifices, and in many other realms of social interaction. It was then sung and performed to a musical accompaniment. Evidence can be found in the *Zuo zhuan* (*Zuo's Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*) to show that poetry was used by scholars in general as a primary medium for exchanging opinions, expressing values, in daily conversations or in diplomatic relationships. This was apart from its use in essay writing and cultural entertainments.

The diplomatic usage of poetry, for example, can be well illustrated by events recorded in the *Zuo zhuan*, which dates back to 526 BC when Confucius was about 25 years old. For instance, once the six ministers of the Zheng State gave a farewell banquet in the honor of Xuan Zi, an envoy from a neighboring state.[2] Xuan Zi asked his hosts to sing some songs of their own, hoping to determine their views, in general about their way of life and in particular their political attitudes towards neighboring states. They each took turns to sing songs that were collected in the *Shi jing* (*The Book of Poetry*). After each of the three delightful love songs titled "The Creeping Grass" (*Ye you man cao*), "Officer in the Lambs Fleece" (*Gao qiu*) and "Lift up Your Robe" (*Qian shang*), Xuan Zi made comments to show his understanding and appreciation. The singing continued throughout the feast. One guest sang "Wind and Rain" (*Feng yu*) which describes the

joy of a lonely wife on seeing her husband return home in dreadful weather. As soon as it was over, another went on to sing "Lady Jiang" (*You nü tong che*) which lauds the beauty of a newlywed woman. Right afterwards, another picked up the tone and sang "Sing Together" (*Tuo xi)* which describes a songstress asking her companions to sing and dance together like drifting leaves after harvest. The atmosphere was so engaging that Xuan Zi, as a guest of the state, recognized their good and friendly intentions as suggested by the songs performed. In addition to expressing his delight and gratitude with positive remarks on the choice of the songs suitable to the diplomatic occasion, Xuan Zi presented them all with horses as a sign of friendship. He also sang "King Wen's Sacrificial Hymn" (*Wo jiang*) as a subtle and grateful reply to his hosts:

I offer a sacrifice
Of ram and bull so nice
May Heaven bless my state!
I observe King Wen's statues great;
I'll pacify the land....

As a natural consequence of this appropriate form of singing and behavior, a harmonious ambiance was gradually built up and a mutual understanding obtained. Their mutual appreciation and friendship deepened, and a consensus was reached in relation to forging and maintaining peace. These activities recorded in the *Zuo zhuan* justify the following observation made by Chen Jingpan (Joseph C. P. Chen): "It was of supreme importance that those songs should be suitable to the situations. They should be able to express the desires of those who chose them, and at the same time they should not hurt the feelings of others. Very often owing to inability to select songs, or to select the right and appropriate ones, serious national disgrace and calamity resulted."[3] It is noteworthy here that poetry as a social discourse *sui generis* was encouraged in various ways, either diplomatic or conversational, writing or singing, public or private, friendly or formal. In spite of this, it was most often recommended as a way of inferring ideas or principles from the songs or lyrics

concerned and then applying them to specific situations. Those ideas, often idiosyncratically expressed, could be a long way from the original intentions of the composers. However, if the lyrics could be suggestively applied to certain forms of social interaction, they would be cited or chanted for the occasions involved. In a number of cases, Confucius himself explained poetry in such an inferential way. For example, Zi Xia once asked about the meaning of these lines from the poem "Duchess Zhuang Jiang" (*Shuo ren*):

Ah! dark on white her speaking eyes,
Her cheeks with smiles and dimples glow
Like flowers painted on a plain background.

Confucius answered, "It is only after the white background is prepared that any painting is possible." "In that case," replied Zi Xia, "can we say that the rites can only base themselves on humanity?" "That is it," joyfully replied Confucius, "since you have thrown some new light on this verse, now I can begin to discuss *The Book of Poetry* with you."(*Lun yu*, 3:8) Confucius also made the same remark to encourage Zi Gong once he found his student able to "tell what may happen in the future when he is told about the past" by virtue of reading poetry between the lines. It is undeniable that the Confucian approach to interpreting poetry seems far-fetched at first sight. Yet, if the Confucian concept of beauty is identified with its essence, consisting of inborn grace and simplicity without artificial adornment, the extended version above could be naturally understood in terms of his intrinsic logic. To be precise, the "plain background" in the poem is symbolic of the lady's inward charm that is essential to her outward beauty. Likewise, the "white background" in a material sense is basic to any painting upon it, and thus analogous to the fact that one's sense of humanity or human-heartedness cultivated from within is fundamental to any rites performed from without. The internal aspect is accentuated rather than the external aspect, notwithstanding the fact that Confucius persistently advocates the balanced development of both aspects in an ideal personality.

Highly conscious of the values of poetry as a form of social discourse, Confucius resolutely advises his immediate disciples to

study *The Book of Poetry* (*Shi jing*) with the ultimate aim, on the one hand, of enabling them to appropriate the songs for the right occasions or social interactions, and on the other, of refining their taste and art of speech. These are associated with two further aims: one lies in the recommended way of using poetry by inferring certain ideas, suggested or projected, from the verses and then applying them in certain verbal interactions or on diplomatic occasions; the other is related to Confucius' educational curriculum. Since most of his students were trained to be statesmen, their knowledge of poetry and its proper use was important and indispensable qualifications at that time. His advice was also rigidly applied to his son, Kong Li, who once recalled for a guest one of his personal encounters with his father: "One day my father (Confucius) was standing in the courtyard and I quickened my steps to pass through. He stopped me and asked, 'Have you studied *The Book of Poetry*?' I answered, 'Not yet.' He then said, 'You will not know how to speak properly unless you study it.' After that I began to study the book." (*Lun yu,* 16:13) But this is only the first step if compared to the full use of poetry in diverse and appropriate ways advocated. Just as Confucius proclaims, "If a man is able to recite the three hundred pieces of *The Book of Poetry*, but fails when given governmental responsibilities; and if he fails to act according to circumstances and to deal with affairs independently when sent on diplomatic missions, what is the use of so much learning?" (*Lun yu*, 13:5) This reveals the Confucian concept that what is acquired should be put into practice for the good of individual development and the interests of the community.

2. Poetry as an Aesthetic Discourse

The Book of Poetry (*Shi jing*) available today is alleged to have been selectively edited by Confucius himself on the basis of a wide range of information dating from remote antiquity. This anthology comprises of several genres as follows: *guo feng* (songs or lyrics), *xiao ya* (odes), *da ya* (epics) and *song* (hymns). Here, *The Book of Poetry* is subdivided into four major sections: the "Chapter

of Songs," which reflects mainly the everyday lives of people in general; the "Chapter of Odes," reflecting the lives of the nobility; the "Chapter of Epics," recording historical deeds and reflecting the life of the rulers; and finally, the "Chapter of Hymns," intended to glorify the ancestors of the rulers and inspire their descendants to worship them as gods (i.e., political models). In the time before Confucius, poems were considered and used as historical, political and religious records and not merely as works of art. In Confucius' era, poetry straddled the two provinces of intellectual learning and aesthetic education. That is to say, it began to be looked upon not merely as a source of knowledge related to politics, ethics and history, but as a form of art directed toward the cultivation of the mind and the person as a whole.

Because of its aesthetic values, poetry plays an indispensable part in the personal cultivation required to facilitate the becoming of a gentleman or superior man (*jun zi*), one of the highest ideals of individual life. This notion is emphasized by Confucius in his remark: "Personal cultivation inspired by poetry, made firm by rites, and completed by music." (*Lun yu*, 8:8) For poetry is generally believed to be expressive of feelings and affections through its descriptions of both inner and outer experiences. It can be read, recited and appreciated so that one may get to the bottom of the moral message implied in the work concerned. The reader is prone to be deeply impressed and moved by such human values as a love for the good, a hatred of the evil, and sympathy for the miserable, etc. That is to say, poetry *par excellence* may serve as a potent guide, stimulating and helping the reader in his or her moral development through aesthetic experience, setting his will on the right path and, above all, determining his personal cultivation or character formation.

Considering the aesthetic and artistic functions of poetry, Confucius so sincerely reminds his disciples, "Why don't you study *The Book of Poetry*? Poetry can serve to inspire (*xing*), to reflect (*guan*), to communicate (*qun*) and to admonish (*yuan*). On one hand, the teachings presented in *The Book of Poetry* can help serve one's parents well; on the other hand, the knowledge and methods provided in it can help serve one's lord well. Moreover, one can

learn a lot of names of birds, beasts, plants and trees." (*Lun yu*, 17:9) The Confucian view of poetry is largely derived from this comment. It is apparently intended to teach the disciples how to study poetry as a form of aesthetic discourse; but in praxis it turns out to be an overall guideline or relatively systematic theory oriented to poetic composition in particular and literary creation in general. Li Zhi (1527-1602), for example, asserts that legends can also perform the functions of *xing*, *guan*, *qun* and *yuan*.[4]

As is observed, the entire argument aforementioned reveals at least six functions of poetry as the key aspects of Confucius' program of art education. First and foremost, poetry is inspiring in that it can evoke and exalt sentiments, thoughts and intentions through vividly suggestive and associative imagery, in addition to its faculty enriching the imagination. Secondly, poetry allows reflection on the human condition and way of life so that insightful judgments can be made through contemplation, in addition to enhancing the powers of observation. Thirdly, the communicative dimension of poetry can be used to smooth and harmonize human relations through two-way communication, and remold ideas by virtue of the values expressed. Fourthly, the admonitory tendency in poetry can provoke regret, complaints and critique of the social environment, in addition to helping one master the art of satire in relation to human problems. Fifthly, the moral dimension of poetry helps cultivate a sense of piety towards one's parents as a natural result of the moral teachings drawn from such poetry. Subsequently, the political dimension of poetry helps to develop a sense of mission, and the diplomatic tactics necessary to serve one's ruler, because of the cultural heritage and historical significance of *The Book of Poetry,* and the possibility of extrapolating from poetry to other situations or occasions and vice versa. Finally, the cognitive dimension of poetry helps identify the names or species of fauna and flora.

At this point, it is desirable to explain what is implied by these statements in relation to such paramount functions of poetry as *xing* (to inspire), *guan* (to reflect), *qun* (to communicate) and *yuan* (to admonish), the four major elements comprising an aesthetic discourse in Confucius' poetics.