

*The End
of the
Chinese
'Middle
Ages'*

ESSAYS IN

MID-TANG

LITERARY

CULTURE

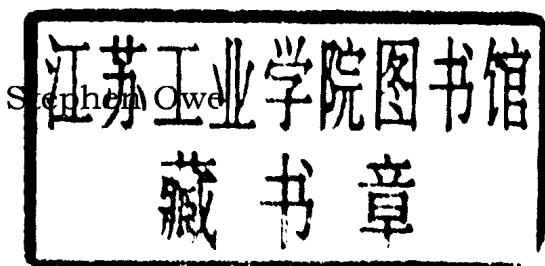


Stephen Owen

THE END OF THE
CHINESE 'MIDDLE AGES'



*Essays in Mid-Tang
Literary Culture*



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Bai Juyi, "Choosing a Dwelling Place in Luoyang," "Eating Bamboo Shoots," "Reciting Poems Alone in the Mountains," "What Came to Mind When Chanting My Poems"

"Huo Xiaoyu's Story"

Li He, "Don't Go out the Gate," "A Long Song Follows a Short Song"

Liu Zongyuan, "An Account of Little Stone Ramparts Mountain," "An Account of the Small Hill West of Gumu Pond," "Theory of Heaven"

Meng Jiao, "Tormented"

Wang Han, "Liangzhou Lyric"

Wang Wei, "Hollow by Meng's Walls"

"Yingying's Story"



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Introduction

These essays come fifteen years after my last volume on the history of Tang poetry, which treated the High Tang. During the interval I have often been asked if I planned to continue my works on Early Tang and High Tang poetry with a volume on Mid-Tang poetry. The essays in the present volume are a partial response to the impossibility of writing such a history of Mid-Tang poetry.

The present essays are literary historical, but they do not, in themselves, constitute a literary history. Rather than describing a process of change or giving a comprehensive account of major and minor writers, they follow an interrelated set of issues through a variety of texts and genres. By their nature these particular issues strongly suggest close connections to larger areas of cultural, and perhaps social, history. On one level the texts discussed are themselves a part of cultural history: the public account of acquisition and ownership, the wittily hyperbolic interpretation of the miniature garden, and the discussion of romantic intrigues are acts of social display in their own right, and the values they embody must to some degree be assumed in the audience in which these texts circulated. On another level, however, the ways in which these discursive phenomena relate to more concrete social practices—for example, patterns of landownership, garden construction, and concubinage—lie beyond the scope of these essays.

A “history of Mid-Tang poetry” is inappropriate because

poetry in this period, dating roughly from 791 to 825, is less susceptible to separate generic treatment than the poetry of the Early Tang or High Tang. In style, in topics, and in norms of treatment, the poetry of the Mid-Tang is much more varied than that of the High Tang, and the ways in which the scope of poetry broadened and changed were closely tied to changes in other discursive forms. Poetry, classical tales, and nonfictional prose share common concerns in a way that occurs less frequently in the Early and High Tang. It was perhaps an intuition of this aspect of Mid-Tang poetry that led many influential critics from the thirteenth century on to condemn the poetry of this period as somehow less "poetic" than that of the High Tang. But the very breadth of Mid-Tang poetry, its movement beyond the limitations of earlier poetry, can also be its strength.

Modern literary theory alternates between asserting an economy of genres (that each discursive form is privileged to do things that other forms cannot) and asserting the shared historical basis for all forms of cultural representation within a given period. The former moment asserts that poetry or the novel or drama is somehow special, that it is primarily engaged in exploring its own generic possibilities and responding to its own generic history. The latter sees all contemporary discursive forms as sharing some common historical determination that transcends genre.¹

Literary theory tends to ask for some decision between these opposed possibilities, or for an attempt to reconcile them. The alternatives are understood as "approaches" rather than historical distinctions that might exist in the material approached. In contrast, a historical point of view may say: "Sometimes more the one; sometimes more the other." During some periods there is, on balance, a strong economy of genre; this was largely true of the Early Tang and High Tang, and

¹ Bakhtin's claims about the novel, made in a context when similar claims were being made about the exclusive distinction of poetry, are a good example of the former moment. "New Historicism" and the so-called historical turn in cultural studies can represent the latter.

thus a "history of poetry" is possible. Mid-Tang poetry, however, broke away from the focus and restriction of genre. The concerns that so profoundly changed poetry in the Mid-Tang are found throughout Mid-Tang writing, and its history is no longer poetry's history alone.

The first of the essays, "Singularity and Possession," considers Mid-Tang representations of identity as an exclusion of or by others. At the level of individual identity, such singularity may appear as an assertion of superiority over others, but it may also be an alienation that brings rejection by others. In writing, singularity reveals itself as a unique and identifiable style that may be appropriated by others but always remains identified with the individual writer. In the famous "Letter in Reply to Li Yi," Han Yu likewise conceptualizes the process by which he perfected his prose as one of excluding elements that belong to (or please) others. Singularity is articulated in the same way at the level of corporate identities, as in the literary group that distinguishes itself from the larger community of writers, and, for Han Yu, in a vision of Chinese culture from which foreign elements (Buddhism) have been excluded. This version of singularity is formally identical to a new discourse of ownership, represented as the exclusion of others from access or possession.

The next essay, "Reading the Landscape," addresses different ways of representing landscapes, showing the ways in which the underlying order of nature has become a problem in the Mid-Tang. On the one side are texts that articulate and comment on the strict order of nature; such landscapes are architectonic to a degree rare in earlier poetry. On the other side are representations of landscapes without underlying order, as masses of beautiful and discontinuous detail. This leads to the question, posed and left undecided in a famous essay by Liu Zongyuan, regarding the existence of a creator, a purposeful intelligence behind the phenomena of the natural world.

This second essay is restricted to representations of the

order of the physical world, but similar questions regarding purposeful order also arise in events in the human world. "Interpreting," the third essay, discusses the Mid-Tang tendency to offer hypothetical explanations for phenomena that either run contrary to received wisdom or try to account for situations usually thought not to require explanation. Unsupported by proof or textual authority, such singular interpretations were often tinged with either irony or madness. In this way interpretation came to be understood as a subjective act, determined less by the phenomenon interpreted than by the motives and circumstances of the interpreter. Mid-Tang self-awareness of this new, more subjectively motivated sense of interpretation can be seen in two poetic attempts by Bai Juyi to console himself after the death of his infant daughter: he understands his endeavors to "be philosophical" about her death as mere consolation, as truths that are used by a subject for other motives and are inadequate to contain the reality of feeling.

When carried out at the level of pure play, such subjective acts of interpretation are wit. "Wit and the Private Life" treats playfully inflated interpretations of domestic spaces and leisure activities as a discourse of private valuation, articulated against commonsense values. Such values and meanings, offered in play, belong to the poet alone, and they create an effective private sphere distinct from the totalizing aspect of Chinese moral and social philosophy, in which even solitary and domestic behavior are part of a hierarchy of public values. To offer an example, when a fifth-century official left the court to live as a recluse in the mountains, the ostensibly private decision could be, and often was understood as, a political statement; when the Mid-Tang poet wittily claimed complete devotion to his bamboo grove or his pet crane on his day off, his playful excess broke free of public and political meaning. It should not be surprising that this realm of play usually concerns the poet's possessions. These texts weave together ownership, subjective interpretation, and the exclu-

sion of others, whose commonsense perspective prevents them from seeing the value that the poet claims.

The poet who produces small dramas of contentment and amusement in his miniature garden, celebrating the moment in poetry, has already made an important change in the assumptions about how poetry was composed: rather than a poetry responding directly to experience, here experience is staged and the space physically arranged for the sake of composing poetry. "Ideas of Poetry and Writing in the Early Ninth Century" addresses some fundamental changes in the way writing, especially the writing of poetry, was represented in the Mid-Tang.

Already in the technical poetics of the eighth century we find acknowledgment of an interval between an occasioning experience and the writing of the poem. The relation of poetic composition to experience is described as a reenvisioning after the fact. By the early ninth century, the putatively organic link between extra-poetic experience and composition was no longer assumed. The basic material of poetry was the couplet, understood as a *trouvaille*; the couplet was worked on and framed within a poem by reflective craft. Such a view of poetic composition, however unsurprising in the context of the history of Western poetics, represented an important alternative within Chinese poetics, where the paramount value of authenticity had earlier been guaranteed by a proximity of poetic response, if not an absolute immediacy. By the early ninth century, the poem could be thought of as something constructed, rather than an involuntary expression, and what was represented in the poem was a scene of art rather than of the empirical world. This quintessentially "poetic" scene was often described as being "beyond"—beyond the words or the images that appeared to the ordinary senses. But in a famous description of the Mid-Tang poet Li He's process of composition, we also see the poem as an object to be shaped and possessed, no less an imaginative yet tangible construction than the little garden: each day the poet rides out, gets couplets

and lines by inspiration, writes them down and throws them into a bag; each evening he takes the passages out and works them into poems.

The two final essays treat classical tales from the new culture of romance that took shape late in the eighth century. The essay entitled "Romance" takes up "Huo Xiaoyu's Story," a tale of love and betrayal, and discusses the phenomenon in the context of issues raised in "Wit and the Private Life," as an example of private valuation that tries to create a space for experience protected from the larger society and its demands. In contrast to the witty poet celebrating his garden, the commitment of the love affair is not pure play; its private domain inevitably comes into conflict with society and is disrupted. Here, however, we see clearly the presence of an audience that watches, judges, and ultimately intervenes in the ostensibly private love story. In the end, the culture of romance does not belong to lovers but to a community that reads such stories and is represented within them. In stories of romance we see that such a community, though composed of people who apparently belong to the world of public social values, supports the private values of romance.

"Conflicting Interpretations: 'Yingying's Story'" takes up the most famous of all Tang tales. Yingying, the heroine, and her lover Zhang are maternal cousins who might have legitimately married, but they are drawn into the Mid-Tang culture of passionate and unsanctioned romance, which ends, as romances often do, with Zhang deserting Yingying. Each of the lovers is an interpreter, trying to guide the narrative according to his or her own plot, and each makes a claim on the audience to judge in his or her favor. But the lovers' interpretations of events cancel each other out, and we are left with a situation unique in Tang narrative, in which judgment is called for, yet remains uncertain. Again the love story is situated within the context of a larger community that gossips, produces poems on the affair, and deliberates on how Zhang's behavior is to be judged.

The Mid-Tang was both a unique moment in Chinese lit-

erary culture and a beginning. Many phenomena that can be followed through the Song and the succeeding dynasties make their first appearance in the Mid-Tang. In many ways Mid-Tang writers seem intellectually closer to the great Song intellectuals two centuries later than to High Tang writers just a few decades earlier. The pride in singular interpretation, as opposed to the restatement of received knowledge, remained a constant in intellectual culture thereafter.² The fascination with miniatures and small domestic spaces for witty interpretation became the basis of a complex private culture of leisure activities that took its characteristic form in the Song.³ Not only did the culture of romance continue, Tang tales of romance were continually retold and elaborated, as later writers tried to come to terms with the problems they posed. And when the great Song writer Su Shi saw a painting of a beautiful landscape, his response was not simply a desire to visit the spot and experience it directly; in “Written on a Painting of Layered Cliffs and a Misty River in the Collection of Wang Dingguo” 書王定國所藏煙江疊嶂圖, aesthetic idyll becomes a speculative purchase.

不知人間何處有此境，徑欲往買二頃田。

I know not where in the mortal world such a
realm exists,
but I want to go there right off and buy two
acres of fields.

In ways large and small, writers begin to assert their particular claim over a range of objects and activities: my land, my style, my interpretation, my garden, my particular beloved.

² Rote repetition of authoritative interpretation remained part of the tradition, but it was not as highly valued as producing a new interpretation

³ When I say “private culture,” I do not mean that it belonged to the individual alone; if not shared with a group of like-minded friends, it was published to appeal to the like-minded. Nevertheless, this sphere of activity was understood as radically distinct not only from the claims of the state but also from the pragmatic claims of family.

Periods like the Mid-Tang are supposed to have dates. These essays concentrate on writing roughly between the years 791 and 825, though earlier and later works are also included. We know that periods are actually blurred centers that have no clear edges, but our geographical impulse to draw boundaries, to prevent unpossessed space, is instinctively transferred to our maps of history. To tell a good historical story we at least need a beginning.

Any account of the Mid-Tang leads back to Han Yu, the master storyteller whose accounts of literary and cultural history shaped all subsequent accounts.⁴ Han Yu's most famous cultural narrative focuses on Han Yu himself, at the forefront of a Confucian revival. His morally engaged prose, *guwen* 古文 or "old-style prose," was meant to be an adequate vehicle for the restoration of Confucian values. To place Han Yu's account in a narrative of beginnings, let us date the Mid-Tang from 791–92, when Han Yu, Meng Jiao, Li Guan, and a number of other intellectuals came together in Chang'an to take the *jinshi* examination. Han Yu and Li Guan passed in 792. Two other important Mid-Tang writers, Liu Zongyuan and Liu Yuxi, passed the following year.

If we take this as the "beginning" of the Mid-Tang, it is not out of an excessive respect for Han Yu's authority, but because his brilliant staging of an important cultural moment eventually became a powerful agent of change. I say "eventually" because, even though Han Yu had large ambitions, he had no idea he was beginning something called the "Mid-Tang" or what that would mean. Beginnings take on their full meaning only retrospectively; you first have to know what it was that was begun. Nevertheless, despite large disparities in

⁴ The literary term "Mid-Tang," dating from the early Ming, originally applied to the history of poetry and began with the aftermath of the An Lushan Rebellion (the late 750s) or the death of Du Fu (770); that is, the beginning of the "Mid-Tang" was a function of when the literary historian chose to end the "High Tang." Yet the image of High Tang poetry, focusing on Li Bai and Du Fu, was the creation of Han Yu and other Mid-Tang writers.

age—Meng Jiao was born in 751, and Li He in 790—the groupings of writers that formed in the next three and a half decades constituted a distinctive generation in a way that writers of the preceding three and a half decades had not.

The profound changes that appeared in Mid-Tang literature occurred at the same time as Han Yu's remarkable abrogation of continuous history: Han Yu declared himself and his moment a turning point in Chinese culture, a leap across more than a millennium to resume the Confucian tradition that had fallen into error and corruption after Mencius.⁵ However important this claim may have been in the history of Confucianism, such a self-authorizing relation to the past formally embodied a new relation to many received traditions. Such a sense of being a generation of transformation and renewal sustained a variety of changes and new interests that were independent of the initial call for Confucian cultural regeneration.

The young men who came together in Chang'an in the early 790s articulated a rhetoric of urgency and crisis, an insistence that something needed to be done to restore literature and, through the restoration of literature, to restore cultural values. These men were generous in praising each other's work and were convinced that they held the solution to the ills of the land. The *fugu* 復古 ("restore antiquity") motifs and moral urgency of Han Yu, Meng Jiao, and Li Guan do not represent the entirety of the Mid-Tang; in fact, they are only a small part of the complex whole. Their significance seems rather to have been in the very act of instituting a generation, of declaring change and dividing history.

Many have tried to argue for the uniqueness of the political and social circumstances that gave these writers their sense of urgency. The problem with such an argument, posed as an adequate causal explanation, is that political and social

⁵ The obvious European analogy is the Reformation, where the reformers claimed to cross over continuous Catholic tradition to pick up and continue the "true" Christianity of the early Church.

circumstances had been far worse in the Tang without producing a similar sense of urgency among writers. Neither the overthrow of the dynasty by Empress Wu, nor the rampant corruption of the decade following her death, nor the devastation of the country during the An Lushan Rebellion, nor the utter impotence of the government through most of the remaining century and a half of the Tang provoked such a feeling of crisis in writers (with a few exceptions, notably the poetry of Du Fu). We can properly say that Han Yu and his friends perceived an urgency in the present, but that tells us nothing about why they came together at that particular moment.

It would be wiser to offer historical context rather than causal explanations. There seems to have been a particular disillusionment in the early part of Dezong's reign (780–804). The reign began with great hopes for the restoration of the power of the central government out of the ruins of the post-rebellion period. These hopes quickly were shattered by Dezong's abject humiliation at the hands of the regional military commissioners (*jiedushi* 節度使) in 783. His ambitions chastened, Dezong became an unattractive imperial figure, and the ministries of the Daoist Li Mi and his successor, Dou Shen, did little to solve the empire's fiscal and political crises. The year 792 may well have seemed a new occasion for hope, as the great statesman Lu Zhi began what was to be a brief period as chief minister.

Traditional China had its political and economic pragmatists, but their writings were never popular with the historians who controlled the story of the past. Traditional intellectuals, especially in the Tang, tended to see political, social, and economic crises as symptoms of a cultural crisis, and cultural crisis was often conceived as a crisis of language and representation. Although far from unique to Dezong's reign, there was a debasement of imperial language during that period, for example, in the way it was so skillfully deployed by Lu Zhi to negotiate the survival of the dynasty in 783. Lu Zhi spent the coinage of imperial symbolism lavishly at a time

when the royal house lacked the more reliable currencies of power: military force and hard cash. He used honors and what can only be called dynastic “futures,” incomes and privileges that could be realized only by the stabilization of the dynasty. To those who believed in the ancient Confucian principle of “getting the names right,” *zhengming* 正名, the period must have been a nightmare, with honorific titles and merits widely distributed to appease brute power and with regional bureaucratic appointments made hereditary under duress. The dead metaphor of debased currency should be kept in mind here: there was verbal inflation. The “words” by which roles in the Confucian state were realized had become hollow.

The Mid-Tang sea change took place against the backdrop of a perceived crisis of language and representation. The responses to this crisis were diverse yet linked by the recurrent concerns addressed in the following essays. Perhaps the most we can say of such moments in the history of a civilization is that “something happened.” The magnitude of the event is always larger than the stories we can tell about it. But limited stories are our only way to come to terms with the greater phenomenon.



Singularity and Possession

The assumption of an intense relation between verbal representations and the political or social order is one of the most striking characteristics of imperial Chinese civilization. The medieval elaborations of this assumption went far beyond the core Confucian principle of “getting the names right,” *zheng-ming* 正名, a propriety of linguistic usage that ensured social and moral propriety. One formulation of that relation was a naive theory of reflection—that representations “reflected” the political and social order. Such a claim, which admits vast theoretical variation in the precise objects and modalities of reflection, is far from unique to China, and it remains with us today. The alternative formulation was not uniquely Chinese, but it had special historical weight in the Chinese tradition: this was the proposition that good representations can or should transform the political and social order. The most famous modern writer of fiction, Lu Xun, gave up medicine and became a writer in order to save China for just this reason.

The urgency apparent in the literary values of the “restoration of antiquity,” *fugu* 復古, on the part of Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) and his group depended on this assumption. In a different way the “New Yuefu,” *Xin yuefu* 新樂府, of Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) and his friends followed from the same assumption. The clear representation of moral issues and their consequences for society would call forth and strengthen the innate moral sense of all readers, clarifying ethical issues and changing behavior.