History, Poetry, and the Question of Fictionality

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The four functions of poetry as Confucius defined them in *Lun yu* or the *Analects* xvii.9—*xing*興, *guan*觀, *qun*群, *yuan*怨—are certainly very well-known in traditional Chinese criticism, but their exact meaning is not all that clear. What I am interested in here is the second function that Confucius called *guan*, literally to watch or to observe, and variously translated as poetry can be used "to show one's breeding,"[1] "to observe,"[2] or "to observe [people's] feelings."[3] The translations—and in fact the original text—are not very helpful as they are too brief to answer the questions of who is doing the observation and what is being observed. For better help, we may turn to traditional commentaries, and a very useful one is Liu Baonan's 劉寶楠 (1791-1855) *Correct Meaning of the Analects* (*Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義). In that book, Liu first cites Zheng Xuan's 鄭玄 (127-200) commentary on the term *guan* as "to observe the rise and fall of customs" (觀風俗之盛衰); and then he gives his own explanation, saying that "to learn poetry enables one to understand the world" (學詩可論世也). He supports his explanation by further citations:

> It is said in the *Great Preface to the Book of Poetry*: "The sound of a well governed age is peaceful and jubilant, indicating a harmonious situation in governance; the sound of a chaotic age is plaintive and resentful, indicating an aberrant situation in governance; and the sound of a vanquished country is anguished and mournful, indicating that people are suffering." As the ages differ in their situations of governance, the sounds are also different as a result, so the study of poetry could let one observe people's customs and learn about their rise or fall.
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> 詩序云：治世之音安以樂，其政和；亂世之音怨以怒，其政乖；亡國之音哀以思，其民困。世治亂不同，音亦隨異。故學詩可以觀風俗，而知其盛衰。[4]

From this commentary we understand that the observer is the one who listens to the sounds of an age, namely poems sung by people in various communities; and what is being observed is the political situation or moral condition of a certain time represented in the poems. This idea implies that poetry is strictly mimetic in the sense that it reflects the condition of a society and its people, holding, as it were, a mirror up to nature. By mimetic I am referring to Plato's view of poetry or arts as mimesis and as producing images in a mirror (e.g., *Soph.* 239d, *Rep*. 10.596d). It seems that some scholars in Chinese studies have fundamentally misunderstood Plato's view on poetry and representation by arguing that Plato's theory of mimesis is based on a dualistic outlook of reality and fictionality, and that such a dualism is uniquely Western, while in China, such a concept of fictionality does not exist because poetry and historical reality are not sufficiently differentiated, but are almost one and the same.[5] That view is mistaken on both counts because, on the Chinese side, the idea of fictionality is not only a feature of Chinese poetry, but also inhabits, as I shall show later, Chinese historical writing; and then, on the Greek side, Plato "never in fact works with this concept [of fictionality]," as G. R. F. Ferrari argues. In several dialogues touching on the issue of poetry or mimesis, Plato's concern—"What dominates his thinking about poetry (and art in general),"— Ferrari goes on to say, "is not fictionality but 'theatricality'. . . . Fictionality belongs to the artistic product; theatricality belongs to the soul. And by thinking of poetry in terms of theatricality rather than fictionality, Plato makes poetry through and through an ethical, not an aesthetic affair."[6] Plato, in other words, is not thinking about whether poetry is real or not, but whether it is good in its moral influence and social effect. With this ethical concern, Plato is a whole lot closer to Confucius in thinking about poetry than many of those scholars would lead us to believe.

The function of poetry as *guan*, or representation of the social and moral conditions of a given age for "observing the rise and fall of customs," was institutionalized in Chinese antiquity. As Ban Gu 班固 (32-92) wrote in the section on literature and arts of the *Book of the Han* (*Hanshu, Yiwenzhi*漢書・藝文志): "In ancient times, there were officials who collected poems for the kings to observe customs, to learn about gains and losses, and to make appropriate adjustments and rectifications" (古有采詩之官，王者所以觀風俗，知得失，自考正也).[7] According to traditional commentators, the first part of the *Book of Poetry* itself, the so-called *guo feng* (國風) or "Airs of the States" in this Confucian classic, was just such a collection of poems that became vehicles in a two-way traffic of communication, with which "the rulers tried to influence their subjects down below, while the common people expressed their views and discontent to the rulers high up at court" (上以風化下，下以風刺上).[8] Thus

poetry was considered a valuable source of information, to be collected by officials specifically appointed to the task, and presented to rulers for consultation.

As already mentioned above, the idea that poetry has a close connection with historical reality and can be used as a sign to read the times may have led some scholars to believe that Chinese poets write about reality or real life experiences that are historically verifiable. They claim that the famous distinction Aristotle made between history and poetry—that "the former relates things that have happened, the latter things that may happen,"[9]—does not exist in China. They further argue that the distinction between history and poetry, or reality and fictionality, is uniquely Western, based on a sort of Platonic dualism, while Chinese poetry is essentially historical because it is embedded in concrete things and real situations and concerned with literal truth rather than a transcendental meaning. Since, in this critical view, history and poetry are put in an opposition as factual account and fictional creation, the "nonfictional" Chinese poetry naturally falls under the category of historical discourse. "The traditional Chinese reader had faith," as Stephen Owen puts it very clearly, "that poems were authentic presentations of historical experience." To be sure, whether a Chinese poem does indeed present the authentic historical truth is a mystery often buried in the remote past beyond recovery, but Owen argues that the "faith" here refers to "the inclinations of readers and of a poet's anticipation of those inclinations."[10] In other words, he argues that to consider poetic statements as historically verifiable is the habitual expectation in a Chinese way of reading. "The Western literary tradition has tended to make the boundaries of the text absolute, like the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*, a world unto itself," says Owen. "The Chinese literary tradition has tended to stress the continuity between the text and the lived world."[11] In these words, Western and Chinese literary texts are brought into a contrast between self-contained fiction and factual account embedded in historical reality. The shield of Achilles Homer described in book XVIII of the *Iliad*, perhaps the most famous example in Western literature of *ekphrasis* or verbal description of a nonverbal object, is a fictional shield on which a marvelously imaginative picture of both the natural cosmos and the human world are cast in words.[12] The shield of Achilles becomes a symbol of Western poetry, indeed the symbol of symbols, "a world unto itself," redolent of metaphorical and metaphysical meanings. The Chinese poem, on the other hand, is not an autonomous world at all; it is part of the lived world to which the poem refers and in which both its structure and meaning are grounded. According to this critical view, Chinese poetry is essentially a discourse of history.

There is a great deal to be said for the historical grounding of Chinese

poetry. History is important not just as the general background or social condition of the writing and reading of literature, but it often serves as the immediate context of the literary text, the occasion for composing a poem to express feelings and thoughts as responses to that particular occasion. Many Chinese poems are thus occasional poems, arising from a particular moment in the poet's lived experience and turning that experience into the very material for poetic articulation and reflection. The works of the great Tang poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770) are often referred to as a "history in verse" (詩史) because many of his poems draw a vivid picture of the life and times from what is known as the high Tang to the late Tang, especially the war and suffering around the year 755 when the corruption at court and the rebellion led by An Lushan 安祿山, an ambitious general of Turkish origin, precipitated the Tang empire into its speedy decline. Here is a good example of the use of poetry "to observe," that is, to let the ruler, his officials, and by extension all the literati readers observe and see, in the collected poems, intimations of the customs and mores of the times. Poetry is thus considered valuable because of such a moral and political use. Again, as Confucius put it: "Inside the family there is the serving of one's father; outside, there is the serving of one's lord" (邇之事父，遠之事君).[13] The close involvement of poetry with politics in the Chinese tradition and the appreciation of poetry as a sort of mirror of social conditions make the historical grounding particularly important. Much of traditional criticism seems to make the assumption that a poem is composed to register a social commentary on the contemporary scene, explicitly or implicitly, and that it is to be understood as such.

To recognize the significance of history in the Chinese literary tradition does not mean, however, that we should take a Chinese poem for a historical document and understand its discourse as a "strictly true" statement about the real world.[14] I would particularly challenge the misleading contrast between Western and Chinese poetry as fictional creation and historical documentation. History and reality can enter the world of poetry in many ways. Chinese poets are not alone in writing on the occasion of a specific moment in their lived experience, for Goethe also called his own works "occasional poems" (*Gelegenheitsgedicht*), to which "reality must give both impulse and material." He told Johann Peter Eckermann: "All my poems are occasioned poems, suggested by real life, and having therein a firm foundation. I attach no value to poems snatched out of the air."[15] According to Helen Vendler, the famous religious and spiritualist poet George Herbert wrote a kind of "private poetry" that usually begins "in experience, and aims at recreating or recalling that experience."[16] Whatever we may think of Goethe's self-description or Vendler's remarks on Herbert, and whatever difference we may find

between Goethe's occasional poems and, say, Du Fu's, we cannot claim that the connection of poetry with history and lived experience is uniquely Chinese. In the Western tradition itself, that connection has also an impressive presence.

Given the much-emphasized distinction between Western imaginative literature and the historical grounding of Chinese poetry, it may be necessary here to examine and recognize the significance of history in the Western literary tradition. If the shield of Achilles symbolizes the fictionality of Western poetry, we must not forget that there is another famous shield in Western literature, made by the same god of fire, as a conscious parallel to the one made for Achilles. I refer of course to the shield of Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*, a shield cast to symbolize a poetic vision of real history, an *ekphrasis* of historical prophecy. The design on this shield clearly presents Roman history from its legendary beginning in a she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus to Virgil's own time, the glory of the Roman Empire under Augustus. History is revealed on the shield:

> There the Lord of Fire
> Knowing the prophets, knowing the age to come,
> Had wrought the future story of Italy,
> The triumphs of the Romans: there one found
> The generations of Ascanius' heirs,
> The wars they fought, each one. (8.626-29)[17]

Compared with the Homeric epic, the *Aeneid* is thoroughly imbued with history. "The scope of the Greek epic falls short of the scope of the Roman *Aeneid*," as Viktor Pöschl remarks. "It was the Roman poet, Virgil, who discovered the grievous burden of history and its vital meaning. He was the first to perceive deeply the cost of historical greatness."[18] The cost here refers to the sacrifice of love and personal happiness, of the private, human interest that Aeneas must surrender for the sake of an impersonal, public cause, the historical mission of the founding of the Roman *imperium*. Much of the tragic pathos in the Virgilian epic derives from this conflict between the personal and the impersonal, the sacrifice of love for the achievement of a great empire. In reading the poem, the attentive reader will notice what Adam Parry calls the continual opposition of two voices, the voice of "the forces of history" and that of "human suffering."[19] It is interesting to note that time is presented in Virgil's epic on two levels, for what is described prophetically as the future destiny for Aeneas is the present historical time for Virgil and his readers, and Aeneas, having seen his future history depicted on the shield, is portrayed as "knowing nothing of the events themselves" (*rerumque ignarus*, 8.730). The prophetic scenes

on the shield are thus included, as Francis Cairns suggests, "more perhaps for the readers' enlightenment than for Aeneas', since they lie in his future and he is said not to comprehend them."[20] With the hindsight of history, Virgil's readers occupy a better position than Aeneas to understand the historical significance of the images carved on his shield, and in reading the *Aeneid*, they would have no difficulty to see Dido, the queen of Carthage, as prefiguring the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, and when the dying Dido utters her bitter curse and calls for an "avenging spirit" rising from her bones (*ex ossibus ultor*, 4.625), they would remember the awesome Carthaginian general Hannibal and the dangerous years of the Punic wars. That is to say, for the Roman readers the poem becomes, in the words of K. W. Gransden, "a prelude to history and to the understanding of history."[21] They would read the Virgilian epic as both historical and poetic, and the historical elements are absolutely essential to an adequate understanding of the *Aeneid* as poetry. From this we may understand that Western poetry is not severed from historical reality at all, but it has made history an essential part of poetic representation as well as an important assumption in reading and interpretation.

When we come back to examine the historical orientation of Chinese poetry, we may find some similarity to Virgil's historical concerns, even though Chinese poetry is mostly short and has little resemblance to the scope of the Roman epic. The difference is surely enormous, but the notion of history as the working out of some sort of a divine mandate, with its model already existent in a glorious antiquity, a past Golden Age, is at least in some ways common to both the *Aeneid* and the Chinese tradition. Under the influence of a Confucian idealization of antiquity, the Chinese poet tends to assess the present against a perfect beginning, the ideal past under ancient sage-kings. Confucius is especially fond of the customs and institutions of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1122-256 BCE). "The Zhou is resplendent in culture, having before it the example of the two previous dynasties," says the Master. "I am for the Zhou" (周監於二代，郁郁乎文哉。吾從周).[22] Ancient sage-kings and rulers, Yao, Shun, and especially King Wen and the Duke of Zhou, figure prominently in the commentaries on the *Book of Poetry*, and in writing about the historical present, Chinese poets often nostalgically evoke the reign of sage-kings as a yardstick for measurement, a paradigm that sets up an unmatched and unmatchable example for the contemporary scene. When Du Fu described his youthful political ambition as "addressing my lord as Yao and Shun/To bring our mores and customs again to purity" (致君堯舜上，再使風俗淳), the allusion to sage-kings and a return to the purity of their times was more than a mere poetic convention, for it made use of a deeply entrenched sense of history to legitimize his political aspirations.[23] The reverence for ancient

sage-kings, the idealization of the remote past as the final point of reference in judging contemporary social conditions, constitute what might be called a retro-teleology of history, which in a sense predetermines the nostalgic mood of much of classical Chinese poetry that sees the present as always a falling-off from a better and more balanced past.

If we admit that Chinese poems are, by and large, occasional poems, and that the Chinese literary text is often embedded in the real historical context and continuous with the lived world, we still need to consider whether historical discourse in China is strictly factual, and whether Chinese readers past and present do read poetry as history and make no distinction in their expectations when reading the two kinds of texts. In a famous work of Chinese literary criticism, Liu Xie's 劉勰 (465?-522) *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong*文心雕龍), one chapter is devoted to the discussion of hyperbolic expressions. In such expressions, as Liu Xie notes, "though the language is excessive, the meaning is not misleading" (辭雖已甚，其義無害也).[24] That is to say, competent Chinese readers would not take poetic lines for factual statements, and that they would allow poets some kind of a license to exaggerate in order to make their expressions striking and effective. Historians, on the other hand, are not allowed such license and their credibility is called into question when their supposedly factual account seems to exceed the bounds of the probable. In reading the *Book of History*, Mencius 孟子 (371?-289? BCE) dismissed an obviously inflated description of a battle scene in which the blood shed in the war is said to flow like a river, capable of keeping wooden clubs afloat on the surface. "If one believed everything in the *Book of History*," says Mencius contemptuously of such improbable accounts of history, "it would have been better for the *Book* not to have existed at all" (盡信書，則不如無書).[25] And yet, when he talks with Xianqiu Meng 咸邱蒙 about the *Book of Poetry*, Mencius shows much more patience and sympathy, and rejects rigid literalism in reading poetic hyperboles. This is one of the important passages in *Mencius* that has had a tremendous influence on Chinese literary criticism. In commenting on how to interpret poems, Mencius said:

> Hence in explaining an ode, one should not allow the words to obscure the sentence, nor the sentence to obscure the intended meaning. The right way is to meet the intention of the poet with sympathetic understanding. If one were merely to take the sentence literally, then there is the ode *Yün han* which says,
>
> > Of the remaining multitudes of Chou
> > Not one single man survived.

> If this is taken to be literal truth, it would mean that not a single Chou subject survived.
>
> 故說詩者，不以文害辭，不以辭害志。以意逆志，是爲得之。如以辭而已矣，雲漢之詩曰：周餘黎民，靡有孑遺。信斯言也，是周無遺民也。[26]

Instead of demanding the *Book of Poetry* be discarded for overstatements, Mencius calls the reader's attention to metaphors and rhetorical devices that operate beyond the literal sense of the text, and he advocates a kind of historical sympathy that puts the text in its original context and understands a poem in accordance with the author's intention. His different attitudes toward the *Book of History* and the *Book of Poetry* indicate that Chinese readers clearly recognize the generic distinctions between history and poetry, and that they require strict plausibility of historical narratives but exempt poetry from such a requirement. Wang Chong 王充 (27-97?), a great scholar and philosopher of the first century, used the same two lines from *Yün han* to illustrate what he called "artistic exaggeration" (藝增) and made some apposite remarks. The poem was about a great drought in ancient time, he explains. "It may be true that the drought was severe, but to say that not a single person remained alive is mere exaggeration" (夫旱甚則有之矣；言無孑遺一人，增之也). Wealthy people with plenty of food supplies would certainly have survived the ordeal, but the poet used the hyperbole "to increase the effect of the text and to emphasize the severity of the drought" (增益其文，欲言旱甚也).[27] Wang Chong argued against all other kinds of exaggerations but tolerated the artistic one, which he considered justifiable if the rhetorical point was to augment the effect of the text and to embellish its message. Here again, a difference is made between poetic license and historical plausibility.

By gathering a wealth of textual evidence, Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 gives the most effective critique of the hackneyed notion of Chinese poetry as "history in verse," and he particularly calls our attention to the literary or even fictional side of historical narratives. Many dialogues and monologues in historical narratives cannot possibly have been recorded either by the historian himself or by anyone else. In *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 or *Zuo's Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, for example, there was a record of private conversation between a man named Jie Zhitui 介之推 and his mother about retreating to hide themselves in a mountain, and another episode in which the historian recorded the words of a warrior named Chu Ni 鉏麑 before he committed suicide in a courtyard all by himself. These men's recorded speech, says Qian, "has neither witness when they were alive nor anyone to verify it when they are dead. Despite

the commentators' tortuous argument to stitch it together, readers could hardly set their minds at rest or stop voicing their doubts" (皆生無傍證、死無對證者。註家雖曲意彌縫，而讀者終不饜心息喙).[28] Chu Ni's last words before suicide have particularly left many readers wondering, as Li Yuandu 李元度 (1821-1887) asked, "who heard them and who recounted them?" (又誰聞而誰述之耶). But in reading Bo Juyi's 白居易 "Song of Everlasting Remorse" (*Changhen ge* 長恨歌), which also contains improbable reported speech, such questions do not seem to arise. In that famous work of poetic fantasy, a Taoist adept is sent to find the soul of the emperor's favorite consort and finally meets her in a land of fairies. As a token of the love of the emperor and, from the narrative point of view, as a strategy to give the land of fairies and immortals some sense of reality and credibility, the beautiful goddess, who had been incarnated as the royal consort when she sojourned in the human world, gives the Taoist her hairpin broken in half and tells him words that only she and the emperor could have known, words they had said to each other as a vow of love in the middle of the night in the privacy of the inner palace, when no one was around. In reading this, as Qian Zhongshu remarks, "no one seems to have asked dull-wittedly, 'who heard them and who recounted them?' Nor has anyone played the killjoy to accuse the 'Taoist from Linqiong' of lying" (似乎還沒有人死心眼的問「又誰聞而誰述之耶？」或者殺風景的指斥「臨邛道士」編造謊話).[29] Here again, historical and poetic texts are read in different ways with different expectations. It is therefore biased and untenable, as Qian argues, "to believe that poetry is all verifiable factual account while not to know the fictional embellishment in historical writing, or only to realize that poets use the same techniques as historians while not to understand the poetic quality of historiography" (於詩則概信爲徵獻之實錄，於史則不識有梪空之巧詞，祇知詩具史筆，不解史蘊文心).[30] The putative recorded speech of historical characters in *Zuo zhuan*, says Qian, is "in fact imagined speech or speech on behalf of the characters, which becomes, it is not too far-fetched to say, the antecedent of dialogues and dramatic speech in novels and plays of later times" (《左傳》記言而實乃擬言、代言，謂是後世小說、院本中對話、賓白之椎輪草創，未遽過也).[31] Rather than reading poetry as history, then, we should understand how historiography can itself be read, to some extent and in some ways, as imaginative literature.

The interrelationship between history and narrative fiction has often been discussed in the study of Chinese literature. Henri Maspero studied early Chinese historical romances built around some legendary or celebrated historical figures, and pointed out the often confused relations between such historical romance and historical biography. From King Mu 穆王, Chong'er 重耳 (later the Prince Wen of Jin), to Yan Ying 晏嬰, the

wise minister of Qi, and Su Qin 蘇秦, the famous rhetor and political councilor, there is hardly any well-known figure in Chinese antiquity that "has not become the hero of a romance. Imagination being given free rein, imaginary episodes were invented when the real biography seemed insufficient."[32] *Zuo zhuan* provides many examples of a careful rhetorical structure and poetic appeal. Although it is not a novel or historical romance and its description is kept to the minimum, its carefully selected events and speeches are arranged in such a way as to guide the reader always to a moral lesson about good and bad, about a benevolent ruler who is wise and kind or a tyrant who is obstinate and cruel. The moralistic and didactic interest of the narrative, as Ronald Egan observes, may explain why the actual process of historical events like the battle between Jin and Chu is described in a few words with no mentioning of the size, training, equipment, morale of the rival forces or any details of how the armies were deployed in the battle fields, while preliminary matters that implicitly predetermine the outcome in moral terms are given a fuller narration. "The emphasis throughout the narrative is on establishing the right and wrong of the situation and on distinguishing the just from the selfish leader," says Egan. "Once this has been done, the outcome of the battle is predictable, and there is a noticeable lack of interest in depicting the main event."[33] In *Zuo zhuan* as in Chinese historiography in general, as Anthony Yu also argues, one can detect "an attempt to weave a moral pattern wherein not only are the good and bad clearly distinguished but they are also 'encouraged or censured (*cheng'e quanshan*)' accordingly."[34] A moral pattern and didactic interest evidently govern both historical and fictional narratives in China. As Yu shows further, Chinese novels are much influenced by Chinese historical writing, since most novels seek to ground their invented action in dynastic history, and the "popular notion of karmic causality" assumes in novels a function similar to that of the moral pattern in Chinese chronicles, which seeks to explain the practical consequences of speech and action in social and political life. It is in the context of such a conventional historical grounding, Yu argues, that *Dream of the Red Chamber*, also known as *The Story of the Stone*, the acclaimed masterpiece of Chinese narrative fiction, stands out as a "sharp contrast to a different and rival mode of writing—history itself," because it consciously reflects on its own structural fictionality and deliberately locates its action outside an identifiable outline of dynastic history.[35]

But what about poetry, the kind of occasional poems that arise from particular historical moments and lived experiences? Are they really nonfictional and, as Owen puts it, able to be "read as describing historical moments and scenes actually present to the historical poet"?[36] In fact, Owen is far too knowledgeable a reader of classical Chinese poetry to accept the

kind of cultural dichotomy we find in some of his own theoretical formulations, and he himself has given a most thoughtful answer to that question. In an article on this particular issue, Owen seeks to put the "historicist" argument in question. "To put it bluntly," he says, "we never see the grounding of a literary text in its history; we see only the formal imitation of such grounding, the framing of the literary text within another text that pretends to be its historical ground, an 'account' of history."[37] Historical grounding turns out to be nothing more than constructing a context for a literary text out of other historical accounts, and the obvious circularity of such textual construction makes it difficult to substantiate any claim to historical truth or authenticity. Owen illustrates the point by analyzing a poem by Du Fu, "On Meeting Li Guinian in the South" (江南逢李龜年) in which the poet claims that he used to see the famous singer Li "so often in Prince Qi's house," and that he had heard him singing "several times in the hall of Cui Di" (岐王宅裏尋常見，崔九堂前幾度聞).[38] Some commentators have found that claim doubtful since both Li Fan 李範, the Prince of Qi, and Cui Di 崔滌, a palace chamberlain, died in the fourteenth year of the Kaiyuan reign when Du Fu was only a teenage boy. It was unlikely, they argue, though not impossible, that the young Du Fu could have frequented these noble houses and seen Li "so often" there in such social gatherings. Commenting on the debate about the reliability of Du Fu's claim, Owen implicitly rejects the notion that one should read a Chinese poem as though it were making "strictly true" statements about the poet's experience in the lived world. It is quite possible, Owen suggests, that Du Fu "might have misremembered, might have allowed his poetic vision of the K'ai-yüan and his own place in it to overwhelm a more sober memory of 'what really happened'." It is also possible that Du Fu might even have replaced reality with his desire in writing "myths of [his] childhood and youth." Although this is an occasional poem, Owen argues, "there is a world of difference between a poem's *generic* claim to be historically true and actually being historically true."[39] In effect, Owen throws serious doubt on the notion of Chinese poetry as unique and factual account of real experiences. In discussing the ambiguous and richly suggestive texts of Li Shangyin's 李商隱 poems, Owen explicitly defines what he calls the "poetic" elements in contradistinction to those that can only be called historical. If historical grounding consists in anchoring the poetic text in specific moments and locales and determinate relations, then the language of classical Chinese poetry clearly shows a tendency to move away from such anchoring, from historical and narrative specificity toward an elimination of functional words and an ellipsis of syntactic relations. What Chinese readers appreciate as *yunwei* 韻味 or the suggestive, lingering taste of the poetic is often something indeterminate and difficult to

pinpoint, outside the clearly marked boundaries of historical events. Though there is a generic presumption that the Chinese poem "grows out of and comments on a complete living historical ground," and though that presumption is "often strengthened by the increasing precision of occasional titles and prefaces," says Owen, "what sounded 'poetic' was the withholding of precisely those elements in the language which could provide relatively adequate determination of such a historical ground."[40] This particular essay on Chinese poetry and its historical grounding evidently makes a subtle and necessary revision of a notion advocated in Owen's own earlier works, the notion of Chinese poetry as "authentic presentations of historical experience." This is a most welcome revision, because that erroneous notion describes neither the textual condition of Chinese poetry nor the horizon of expectations in most Chinese readers' experiences.

History and poetry are all forms of representation and expression in language; they are forms of communication of truth or certain understanding of truth, or efforts at communicating lived experience and reality. It is in this sense that we may understand the concept of *guan*, the idea that poetry could be read as signs of the times, and be used to observe the social and moral conditions of a given age. The truth poetry articulates is a form of truth about human life, but not the mechanic copying of the minute details of life, so poetry is not a record of the quotidian particulars. It is in this sense that Aristotle considers poetry "a more philosophical and more serious thing than history," for history represents particulars, but poetry represents universals, namely, "the sort of thing that a certain kind of person may well say or do in accordance with probability or necessity."[41] Understood appropriately, what Confucius meant by *guan* or the cognitive function of poetry refers precisely to this capability of poetry to tell truth in a general or universal way, and this does not mean that Chinese poetry must be literally true and contain no elements of fictionality. On the other hand, insofar as history purports to reveal the truth of a historical process rather than just providing information about what actually happened, it is not so different from poetry in speaking about something universal through the particular. As historical narratives try to reconstruct something in the past, imagination plays an important role in the writing of history, and fictional elements are not, and indeed cannot, be completely excluded. History and poetry are not mutually exclusive, even though they are very different in significant ways. It is therefore important for us to understand history and poetry as forms of representation and expression, and to see them as closely related to one another in a complementary, rather than a dichotomous, relationship.

Endnotes

1. D. C. Lau, trans., *The Analects* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 145.
2. James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 109; Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Raymond Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 70.
3. Arthur Waley, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1992), p. 212.
4. Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lun yu zhengyi* 論語正義, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 2:289-90.
5. Here I am summarizing critical views found in such works as Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Pauline R. Yu, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); and several books by François Jullien, from the earlier *La valeur allusive: Des catégories originales de l'interprétation poétique dans la tradition chinoise (Contribution à une réflexion sur l'altérité interculturelle)* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1985), to the more recent *Penser d'un Dehors (la Chine): Entretiens d'Extrême-Occident* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000).
6. G. R. F. Ferrari, "Plato and poetry," in George A. Kennedy, ed., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, *Classical Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 98.
7. Ban Gu 班固, *Han shu* 漢書, 12 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 6:1708.
8. *Mao shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義, in Ruan Yuan 阮元, ed., *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1980), 1:271.
9. Aristotle, *Poetics* 51b, in *Poetics, with the* Tractatus Coislinianus, *reconstruction of* Poetics II, *and the Fragments of the* On Poets, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 12.
10. Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, p. 57.
11. Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 67.
12. For a theoretical study of this poetic topos and the complexity of verbal and nonverbal representations, see Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
13. Lau, *The Analects*, xvii.9, p. 145.
14. This is a statement Owen made in his discussion of Chinese *shi* or

poetry: "In the Chinese literary tradition, a poem is usually presumed to be nonfictional: its statements are taken as strictly true. Meaning is not discovered by a metaphorical operation in which the words of the text point to Something Else. Instead, the empirical world signifies for the poet, and the poem makes that event manifest." (*Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, p. 34).

15. Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, trans. John Oxenford (London: Dent, 1970), p. 8.
16. Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 5.
17. I quote from Robert Fitzgerald's English translation of Virgil, *The Aeneid* (New York: Random House, 1981). The number of book and line refers to the Loeb edition of Virgil's original Latin text (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).
18. Viktor Pöschl, "Aeneas," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Interpretations: Virgil's Aeneid* (New York: Chelsea, 1987), p. 13.
19. Adam Parry, "The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*," in Bloom, *Modern Critical Interpretations*, p. 72.
20. Francis Cairns, *Virgil's Augustan Epic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 102.
21. Gransden, "War and Peace," in Bloom, *Modern Critical Interpretations*, p. 141.
22. Lau, *The Analects*, iii.14, p. 69.
23. Du Fu 杜甫, "Twenty Two Rhymes to His Excellency the Left Coadjutor Wei" 奉贈韋左丞丈二十二韻, in Qiu Zhao'ao 仇兆鰲 (fl. 1685), *Du shi xiangzhu* 杜詩詳注, 5 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 1:74.
24. Zhou Zhenfu 周振甫, *Wenxin diaolong zhushi* 文心雕龍注釋 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1981), p. 404.
25. D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), VII.B.3, p. 194.
26. Ibid., V.A.4, p. 142.
27. Wang Chong 王充, *Lun heng* 論衡 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin, 1974), p. 130.
28. Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, *Guan zhui bian* 管錐編, 5 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1986), 1:165. Jie Zhitui 介之推, who had followed Duke Wen of Jin for many years in exile, refused to take office when the Duke returned to rule over Jin. He had a conversation with his mother and then went to live in seclusion in Mianshan. See *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義, the 24th year of Duke Xi, 115a, in Ruan Yuan, *Shisan jing zhushu*, 2:1817. Chu Ni 鉏麑 was a warrior who, sent by

Duke Ling of Jin to murder a good minister Zhao Dun 趙盾, committed suicide to avoid killing a good man on the one hand and disobeying his orders on the other. See ibid., the 2nd year of Duke Xuan, 165a, 2:1867.

29. Qian Zhongshu, *Song shi xuanzhu* 宋詩選注 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1982), p. 5, n. 1.
30. Qian Zhongshu, *Tan yi lu* 談藝錄, enlarged ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1984), p. 363.
31. Qian Zhongshu, *Guan zhui bian*, 1:166.
32. Henri Maspero, *China in Antiquity*, trans. Frank A. Kierman, Jr. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), p. 360.
33. Ronald Egan, "Narratives in Tso chuan," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 37 (Dec. 1977): 335.
34. Anthony C. Yu, *Rereading the Stone: Desire and the Making of Fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 40.
35. Ibid., pp. 46, 52.
36. Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, p. 57.
37. Stephen Owen, "Poetry and Its Historical Ground," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 12 (Dec. 1990): 107-08.
38. Du Fu, in Qiu Zhao'ao, *Du shi xiangzhu* (*Du Fu's Poems with Detailed Annotations*), 5:2060.
39. Owen, "Poetry and Its Historical Ground," p. 109.
40. Owen, ibid., p. 111.
41. Aristotle, *Poetics* 51b, *Poetics* with the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, etc., p. 12.