

In Lieu of a Preface

At the creation, when Pan Gu chiselled the universe out of Primordial Chaos, the purer elements ascended to form the heavens, the baser descended to form the earth. So legend has it. Our story tells of the continent of Sinim, easternmost of the Four Great Portions created round the world's axis; it tells of Sinim's sacred peaks, and the greater and lesser trees that adorn them and protect them from the ravages of wind, rain and snow, providing an enduring reminder of the original unity of earth, heaven and man.

But let us proceed with our story: one fine spring day, on one of the highest peaks of the centrally situated Arsyversian Mountains in the aforementioned land of Sinim, a white-whiskered old gentleman dressed in the loose-flowing robes of a Daoist hermit was seated beneath the branches of Lithodendron, the fabled Stone Tree, mumbling to himself (as was his wont), when suddenly he sensed an alien presence, and rising to his feet beheld a youth standing close by, peering through a glass at the patterns traced by nature on the Tree's leaves. The youth's features (when finally he turned his head and answered the old man's gaze) at once proclaimed him to be a citizen of the westernmost of the Four Great Portions, the distant realm of Bullbary, and from his short and much-patched robe and the hempen sandals on his feet, he was clearly a like-minded, if somewhat bedraggled, Seeker of the Way.

Deasil (for so the old hermit was named) and young Widdershins exchanged credentials, and upon discovering that they were both members of the Hermetic Fraternity of Lithodendric Masons (the existence of which, Gentle Reader, I must beg you not to divulge to another living soul), were instantly swept away in a flood of koans and enthusiasms, that soon progressed from the riddle of the Stone Tree itself to other plants and herbs and botanical arcana of Sinim. —

*In Sinim's Land stand two beneath the Tree of Stone;
Eastern and Western rapt in hybrid polyphone.*

As the two conversed, imperceptibly the Golden Crow of the Sun commenced his descent, and the shades of evening drew in around them. Reluctantly, and only after agreeing to renew their acquaintance at a later date, our two pilgrims went their separate ways.

In a twinkling spring turned to summer, and at the time appointed the two met once again beneath the Stone Tree. Widdershins seemed a little agitated.

'Friend Deasil,' he began without further ado, 'let us leave this Stone conundrum till another day. For the present, I beg you to accompany me to a locality not far from here, in which there is something that concerns us both.'

Deasil agreed, and the two set off at a brisk pace in an easterly direction. They skirted a small wood and clambered down a neatly terraced mountainside, after

which the terrain became more wild and unmanageable. They were obliged to force their way through a dense thicket of brambles, tearing their robes and cutting their arms and legs on the coarse thorns. Finally the very thorns seemed to lose heart, and gave way to a bleak prospect of barren hillside, denuded and scarred by flood and fire. In the distance, on a ledge set into this undulating wasteland, the two pilgrims beheld a pile of uprooted trees, arranged in the manner of a giant funeral pyre.

Sadly they turned their backs on the desecrated highlands and wended their way down the lower slopes to a valley fresh with green and bathed in a luminous mist. Behind the mist, however, they perceived an arc of impending storm cloud, and even as they stood contemplating this scene of light within darkness, there was a rumbling of thunder, which hurried them onwards and down to the end of the valley. Here they crossed a little stream and came to the ocean. They sat on the sand and looked out across the water. Their journey across the mountains had left them weary. Night fell, and it seemed they were spirited over the ocean and into the dark vault of the heavens. Pinpoints of light could be seen below, stretching out in patterns of great beauty over the no longer visible waters of the ocean, drawing the Four Great Portions together in a single net. At the same time they heard the sound of an antique music, a mellow peal as of stone chimes echoing through the firmament. Gradually light and music faded, and a voice could be heard in the darkness, solemn, but gentle, and a little humorous:

'Welcome aboard Axis Mundi, my friends. Allow me to introduce myself: Athanasius K., Keeper of the Centre. I had the honour of accompanying the Son of Heaven on his last ritual peregrination through the Five Sacred Peaks of Sinim, and was able to make some trifling adjustments to the Great Calendar, in token of which he appointed me Keeper in Perpetuity of the Five Talismans. These talismans I have guarded through the troubled centuries. Seeing you wandering on the Central Peak and stumbling down to the ocean, I felt it my bounden duty to take you on board for a little trip. Those plants and trees you have seen growing between the wasteland and the sea are all recent avatars of the old line. They (and others of their kind which I will leave with you) possess healing properties and are destined to play a part in the gradual atonement of man and nature. On your return journey the two of you must carefully collect and preserve specimens of these, and later transplant them to the Realm of Bullbary. You will thus be carrying on the work begun with *Amoenitates Exoticae* and *Hortus Kewensis*, continuing the search that will end only with the rediscovery and worldwide diffusion of the Magic Fungus. Gather the specimens together and place them in a casket made of tablets of jade. And before you deposit this casket in Bullbary, take a stone leaf from Lithodendron and carve upon it an inscription relating the circumstances of your expedition and the nature of the collection.'

When he had spoken these words, Athanasius turned and drifted away through a glowing archway, on which could be discerned the words (or were they stars?) *Litterarum Virtus*.

Deasil and Widdershins awoke to see the first rays of the sun rising above the

sea. Beside them on the sand lay scattered a handful of blooms of a rare and novel beauty, such as they had seldom seen before. They gathered them together and hurriedly retraced their steps up the valley, here picking a blossom or a shoot, there uprooting (with tender care) a sapling, and only when they had gained the foothills of the Arsyversian Mountains did they stop to look back. In the valley shadowy figures were already at work, relentlessly weeding.

'Ah!' sighed Deasil, when finally they reached the Tree and both sank exhausted to the ground, 'what a day and night we have spent!'

Widdershins said nothing, but as soon as he had recuperated his energies, he set the specimens out in some sort of order, and choosing a leaf from the Tree, began at once to carve an inscription in miniscule characters. What follows is a much enlarged rendering of that inscription, together with the marginalia of Deasil, added over a period of days.



Signs of Nature

THIS IS a testimony to survival. Throughout Chinese history, art and literature have been inseparable from a central tradition of spirituality. The impact of the West, the fragmentation of the Chinese universe since 1949, the intense ideological pressure brought to bear on creative artists have in their different ways posed threats to both the art and the tradition. But both have survived far worse threats in the past.

By bringing together literature from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Chinese 'diaspora', we are not inventing a cultural entity; we are reflecting the profoundly cohesive force of the Chinese written word, *wen*, and the continuing power of the traditional conception of literature, *wenxue*.

Originally wen designated the footprints of animals, or the veins of wood and stone, the set of harmonious or rhythmic 'strokes' by which nature signifies. It is in the image of these natural signs that the linguistic signs were created, and these are similarly called wen. The double nature of wen constitutes an authority through which man may come to understand the mystery of nature, and thereby his own nature. A masterpiece is that which restores the secret relation between things, and the breath that animates them as well.

—François Cheng: Chinese Poetic Writing



The Way

François Cheng's words echo those of Liu Xie 劉勰, written fifteen hundred years earlier:

Wen has a great virtue indeed. It is born together with heaven and earth.

文之德也大矣，與天地並生者何哉！

And the Virtue stems from the Way, the unnameable source, the Void. As Cheng wrote of his fellow Parisian exile, the painter Zao Wou-ki:

His quest could not but lead him towards the Open. Beyond existential experience and technical experiment the ultimate aim is nothing less than to attain a genuinely spiritual vision. The more he masters the primeval void and frees the vital inspiration emanating from it, the more he approaches the Source, that point where the human gaze, painter's and spectator's alike, becomes lost in the very origin of all forms. Thus the living space that Zao Wou-ki's brush opens up for us transports us into a region of metamorphoses that we ourselves have always confusedly desired. And it is thus that the singular fire that burns in the artist's starlit night becomes, at each encounter with his paintings, the pure expression of our personal mystery.

Zao's quest for the Open, the Source, is less a deliberate choice, more a spontaneous expression of his individual genius. Things just happened that way, it was an almost haphazard chain of discoveries and self-discoveries. As the poet Zhao Yi 趙翼 wrote, these things are 'three parts human endeavour, seven parts fate' 三分人事七分天. What a shame this old man 老朽 never learned fortune-telling in his youth, or mastered the hexagrams of the Book of Changes!

In a remorseful mood—Deasil

Or, in the words of another modern artist, Liu Kuo-sung, one of the founders of the Fifth Moon school in Taiwan:

Zen is absolute stillness in motion and absolute motion in stillness; though dark it shines forever; though shining, it is forever dark; motion and stillness are the two things that can explore into the original source of life itself. The highest expression in art is to 'go beyond the shapes'....

Both Zao and Liu are 'intuitively journeying towards the mysterious centre of Chinese philosophy.'

Liu Kuo-sung and the poet Yu Kwang-chung ventured into the modernist camp at the same time, and both eventually found their way back into the tradition. In retrospect Yu wrote: 'There are three types—the Filial Son 孝子, the Prodigal Son 浪子, and the Prodigal Son Returned 回頭的浪子. I was like a nice, quiet girl who starts to elope with a wolf. . . . Half way down the road, I ran back home.'

Remembering the past—Red Codicil



The Void

Fiction seeks its vision in the interplay of society and individual, in the shadow-play of Void and Form, illusion and reality. *The Story of the Stone* is the classic Chinese example. All three pairs of stories in this anthology are concerned with outcasts, 'persons in exile', outsiders, and with what Lucien Miller calls "'thingness' . . . the pattern of character which unfolds in a particular society". Their common theme is alienation, the penumbra which the individual must pierce to 'understand the mystery of nature', of his own self and of the society he or she lives in.



The Quest

Are the younger artists and writers, and especially the younger generation inside China, whose recent works occupy well over half the pages in this anthology, also 'journeying towards the mysterious centre of Chinese philosophy'? Their journey has to be seen in its political context. Since the brief but intense 'Peking Spring', democracy has been suppressed and experimental art has been all but forced underground. In 1980 the veteran actor Zhao Dan pleaded from his death-bed:

Artistic creation is highly individual. It cannot be approved by a show of hands. You can comment, criticize, encourage or applaud. From a historical point of view, art and literature must be free from any restriction.

But during the recent 'spiritual pollution' campaign, the latest in a series of inward contractions that began in 1980, experimental writers

were branded, either by name or by innuendo, 'polluted' and 'polluters'. These writers (practitioners of *wen*) are inheritors of the old line, in Athanasius' sense. They are following, in their various ways, a common calling to restore through literature the 'secret relation between things'. They are exercising their freedom to search, and for this they are suspect. Their quest continues, but within stricter confines. Literature is a dangerous art to practise in China.

Their spirit is well expressed by Xiao Ling, in Zhao Zhenkai's story 'Waves':

Perhaps the search itself is what already epitomizes our generation: we will not easily accept death, or silence, or obedience to any fixed judgement.

Zhao (writing this time as poet—Bei Dao) issues a challenge on behalf of a whole generation:

*Let me tell you, world,
I—do—not—believe!
If a thousand challengers lie beneath your feet,
Count me as number one thousand and one.*

Yang Lian in his poetry traces the often bewildering spiritual transition from a loss of certainty to a newfound and still unfamiliar faith:

*A secret horizon
Ripples, trawls distant dreams to the surface
Distant, almost boundless.
Only the wind rousing a song
In place of the broken sundial buried in the earth
Points to my dawn.*

This same paradoxical spirit of disenchantment and determination is found in the work of the young Taiwan poet, Xiang Yang:

*The one thing China has not known is light
Soon the bright day will dawn,
But till then, in the thick rain, the ink-splash rain,
In the bold raising of hands,
And the determined eyes,
Let me take you sailing.*

In Hong Kong, Huang Guobin returns again and again to his theme of the inner quest which is at the same time a cosmic journey:

We believe too much in ourselves.
 We never let our roots reach into the soil
 To listen to the song deep in the ground
 And the ore racing in the veins of igneous rocks.
 We never stretch ourselves like seedlings
 To put forth soft green tender leaf-tips
 And finally, amidst the silence of lakes and mountains,
 Hurl headlong into the boundless space beyond the heavens.



Living Tradition

These young writers and artists, like their predecessors in the 'old' *avant-garde* of the 50s and 60s, are confronting the challenge of being both modern and Chinese. An essential part of their artistic growth, and a key to the harmonious reconciliation of these at first sight disparate elements, is the freedom to choose and experiment. Modernism is not a *cul-de-sac*, but a sometimes necessary phase of openness to change. In the same way, tradition is not an immutable canon, but rather a constant source of renewal. The ultimate goal is, just as it was with Zao Wou-ki, 'nothing less than to attain a genuinely spiritual vision'. The young writers have followed many paths toward this goal, drawing on tradition and modernism in different measures. The young playwright, novelist and critic, Gao Xingjian, talks of bringing the old lyrical and symbolic spirit of Mei Lanfang and infusing it into a reborn modern Chinese theatre—already revived in his own plays with transfusions of Theatre of the Absurd and Theatre of Cruelty. Hong Huang in his 'Misty Manifesto' draws on traditional Chinese poetics to bolster the case for modernism in poetry. Yang Lian looks anew at many neglected areas within the tradition, areas he considers fertile for the contemporary artist; while Yang Mu argues that the 'new poetry' in Taiwan has at last come of age, after a hard-earned apprenticeship in the 60s and the violent 'indigenous' reaction in the 70s.

In his Sui Garden Poetics, Yuan Mei analyses the word chuan 傳 (tradition) into Man + Special 人加專: in other words, it is men of special talent who perpetuate, transmit, create tradition. Tradition is not an orthodoxy, an accepted canon; it is a continuous process of growth, in which new cells replace old and diseased ones. So tradition does not really stand in rigid opposition to the modern. The great artists of the modern age see tradition in a new light, interpret it afresh, and thereby give it vitality.

In a serious moment—Deasil

During a recent lecture-recital in Hong Kong, the great master of *Kunqu* opera, Yu Zhenfei, now in his eighties, demonstrated, with an extraordinary blend of charisma and childlike humour, how the centre of the practice of *Kunqu* lies in Daoism, how the best entry to stagecraft is *Taijiquan*, and how the only convincing stage laugh comes from the alchemical furnace, the *dantian*.

Yu also stressed roundness in movement and gesture, the Ultimate (taiji) circle, essence of this martial and meditative art.

After my morning practice—Deasil

To a casual observer this venerable old actor and the young experimental writers may seem to belong to two different worlds; but at a deeper level they are part of a continuum. The authors of *The Impostor* and *The Bus-stop* are also searching, through humour, satire, and the theatrical expression of human absurdity, for a truer and more 'genuinely spiritual vision' of man and society.



Antiquity Before Us, Face to Face

There are signs that the tradition is making itself felt again, like an inexhaustible subterranean spring. Few books can claim a greater antiquity, and simultaneously a greater modernity, than the *Book of Changes*. In its Wilhelm/Baynes version, it has come to permeate the modern consciousness of the West. The Chinese have largely forgotten it, especially the young, always eager to read the latest in American fiction, but incredulous if told that this very fiction contains their own distant past. Yang Lian is an interesting exception to this rule. In a short essay published in September 1983, he points to the *Changes* as an unexplored repository of indigenous Chinese symbolism. He is merely bringing home to China what the West has briefly borrowed. In the words of Liu Xie again:

*Antiquity, however remote,
Appears before us, face to face.*

終古雖遠，
優焉如面。



Trees on the Mountain

Bei Dao, in one of his most recent poems, 'On Tradition', muses:



*the mountain goat stands on the precipice`
the arched bridge decrepit
the day it was built
who can make out the horizon
through years as dense as porcupines
day and night, as sombre
as tattooed tribesmen
are the wind-chimes; none hear the ancestral voices
the long night silently enters the stone
the wish to move the stone
is a mountain range, rising and falling
in history textbooks*



tr. Bonnie S. McDougall

The *Book of Changes*, when consulted concerning our enterprise, was more cautious and reassuring:

Development—Gradual Progress



A tree on the mountain develops slowly according to the law of its being and consequently stands firmly rooted Within is tranquility, which guards against precipitate actions, and without is penetration, which makes development and progress possible.



Hexagram 53 (Wilhelm/Baynes version)

Gradual—what a deceptive and terrifying world! Where water flows, there a channel forms: 水到渠成. Think how many great monuments have eventually succumbed to this gradual and silent process: the slow erosion of a mansion by termites, the relentless decline of the Jia family in The Story of the Stone. The achievements of many a great artist or poet are indeed built on the dead bones of innumerable lesser forerunners: 一將功成萬骨枯. Such is the gradual progress of history. Alas! A sobering thought!

During a sleepless night—Deasil



Old Deasil nodded thoughtfully as he read the inscription once more through to the end. The two men began their journeys home, and while they walked, and before they parted ways, Deasil addressed these words to his young friend, speaking inwardly, almost as if to himself:

'The mountain is young. It will always remain so, and the grass and trees will continue to take root on it. The soil nourishes, and the trees in their turn when once they grow to maturity, protect the mountain, cleanse the air, and enrich the very soil that gave them birth.

'Come, you had better do as Athanasius instructed, take this batch of absurd specimens with you to Bullbary, and see how they fare there.'



This record written during a typhoon, with heavy rain beating on the windowpanes.

Postscript

The fabled Stone Tree is of course *The Story of the Stone*, original title of the novel popularly known as *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (whence 'Redology', and its acute form, 'Reddiction'). This novel was indeed our original point of intersection, and became a point of departure for this adventure into the modern world. The large characters in the margins are taken from early rubbings, some from steles or rock-inscriptions on the sacred peaks themselves. The seal-carving, and the calligraphy on pages 181, 271 and 305, are by Wu Zijian 吳子建. The calligraphy on page 9 is by Professor Jao Tsung-i 饒宗頤. The Magic Fungus 靈芝 scroll-pattern on pages 11, 81 etc. is taken from a Yuan dynasty blue and white bowl in the collection of the Art Gallery, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. François Cheng's 程抱一 thoughts on Zao Wou-ki (pp. 4 and 13) can be found in the catalogue prepared by the Hong Kong Arts Centre for Zao's retrospective there in 1981, and his thoughts on the nature of *wen*, in *Chinese Poetic Writing* (Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 213. Liu Kuo-sung 劉國松 on Zen is from *Liu Kuo-sung: The Growth of A Modern Chinese Artist* by Chu-ting Li, Taipei 1969. The remark about the 'mysterious centre of Chinese philosophy' is from Chang Chung-yuan's *Tao: A New Way of Thinking*, Perennial Library 1977.

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S.C.S.
J.M.