Tracy Kaminer

Background for Poetry and the Garden

Although the earliest Chinese poetry originates from the early Zhou Period (770-256 BC) with the Book of Songs, the period we are going to talk about the most today is the Tang Dynasty, the Golden Age of Poetry, dating from 618-907. This was a time of reunification, building on the short lived Sui dynasty—the time of the opening of the Grand Canal linking north and south, the time of expansive trade along the Silk Road. The Tang capital, Chang’an, now Xi’an, was the largest city in the world, housing at least a million people (some estimates have it at 2 million), with traders, students and pilgrims from all over Asia. It was an incredibly open time culturally, with music and art taking on foreign influences. It was also a great time of religious diversity and acceptance, with Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism actively practiced, and with the introduction of Islam. In fact literature at the Great Mosque in Xi’an today claims that an Islamic structure has existed in that place since the 700s.

Religious Background:

It is helpful to know something of the Great Religious and Philosophical Traditions present in China. Confucius, whose dates are 551-479 BC, responded to the greed, insincerity, and selfishness of his day by trying to inspire people to do good. He was China’s first moral philosopher. He extolled filial piety, or reverent respect of children toward their parents, but he extended the notion by saying that society was like family, so would benefit from the same reverent respect. The highest virtue in Confucius’s vocabulary was ren, or perfect goodness, humanity, or human-heartedness. It entailed deep concern for the well being of others. He was a great teacher and prepared his students for careers in government service, encouraging them to read the traditional texts and composing some himself.

Confucius and his followers were activists, believing that government benefited the people.

Daoists, on the other hand, defended the private life and wanted the rulers to leave people alone. They did not place human beings at the center of the cosmos. Instead they were intent on preserving the natural order of things. They affirmed the Dao, or the Way, the energy of all that exists or happens. Daoism is based largely on the Laozi, or the Classic of the Way and Its Power (Daodejing). It is traditionally thought to have been compiled in the 6th century BC but may have been compiled in the 3rd century BC. It venerates the yielding over the assertive and the silent over words. It shows the interdependence and transformation of opposites: “When everyone in the world sees beauty in the beautiful, ugliness is already there. When everyone sees good in the good, bad is already there.” Any purposeful action is counterproductive.

Do not honor the worthy,
And people will not compete.
Do not value rare treasures,
And the people will not steal.
Do not display what others want,
And the people will not have their hearts confused.

A sage governs this way:
He empties people’s minds and fills their bellies.
He weakens their wills and strengthens their bones.
Keep the people always without knowledge and without desires,
For then the clever will not act.
Engage in no action and order will prevail.

While Confucianism is a humanistic philosophy, Daoism sees humans as only a small part of the total reality. People need to see their place in the continuity of the natural world.

Also important are the theorists of yin and yang. Yin is associated with feminine, dark, receptive, yielding, negative, and weak

Yang with masculine, bright, assertive, creative, positive, and strong.

The interaction of these poles was seen as integral to the processes that generate natural order. Think about this: while all of this was being elaborated upon in China, we had the Upanishads and the Buddha in India and Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in Greece, a great age of spiritual and philosophical development.

We should mention another strain of Daoism that emerged during the 2nd century BC. A Daoist compilation talked of mountain gods and the magic realm of the Kunlun Mountains in the far west where immortality could be attained. There was intense interest in astrology, alchemy and ways of joining the immortals. Messages from the immortals were thought to have been inscribed on rocks and other objects. The soul was conceived to have two parts:
the lighter part would ascend to the clouds and the earthly part would stay in or near the grave and feast on offerings placed in the grave.

206 BC-220, or the Han Period is associated with the rise of Confucianism. An imperial academy was founded with professors for each of the Five Classics. By the first century BC it was widely accepted that officials should be trained in the Confucian classics. Officials could nominate family members but a man did not have to come from an official family to enter the civil service. By the mid 2nd century, there were 30,000 men in the Imperial Academy hoping to win a place in the civil service.

A ruler who did not fulfill his role properly, or recognize the yin and yang, might upset the balance of heaven and earth, causing floods, earthquakes, and other calamities.

Confucian officials were not bureaucrats only but also critics of the government. It was their duty to advise. They might criticize government monopolies, excesses on palace ladies, hunting parks, and other excesses, not all without risk of course.

During the period between the Han and the Tang, there was an atmosphere of alienation and personal indulgence. Confucian ideals of public service lost much of their hold in this turbulent time. There were lots of arguments over metaphysical questions, such as the meaning of nonbeing and its relationship to being. “Pure talk” or clever conversation was much in style. A search for naturalness and spontaneity led to a burst of self expression in the arts, especially in poetry. This was the time of a group of gifted poets called the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove and people who developed the lyric potential of verse in five syllables. There was also an emergence of a hereditary aristocracy that entrenched itself in the higher reaches of officialdom at this time.

Buddhism

At this time it was hard to put faith in government. People started to think about life and death, humanity and the cosmos in new ways, thanks to a religion filtering into China from India.

Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, lived in India at the time of Confucius. He took for granted the basic concepts of Indian cosmology such as karma and reincarnation. He began to teach people that their attachments and desires were the source of their suffering. Because of their attachments their lives were filled with disappointments and anxieties. The way to put a stop to this was to live an ethical life and engage in spiritual practice that enhance concentration and insight. Those who progress enough can enter nirvana. There were many strains of Buddhism traveling through China, including Mahayana, which taught that pursuing
Nirvana was selfish compared with becoming a Boddisatva, a being of advanced spiritual standing who postponed entry into nirvana in order to help other humans.

To many Chinese, Buddhism seemed a strain of Daoism, especially since there was a magical element to some forms of it. Even the concept of fundamental emptiness seemed related to Daoism’s nonbeing. But perhaps the reason for its great advance in China was that it addressed suffering and death more directly than the other traditions did. It offered a vision of the afterlife and prospect of salvation. It was particularly attractive to women and bodhisattvas were seen as neither male nor female, although sometimes they look very feminine.

As Buddhism developed as a higher religion, so did Daoism as it concentrated on enhancing the yang energies of the body (breath control, restricted diets, herbs, elixers, etc.).

So back to the Tang Dynasty:

In this time of reunification, the Tang expanded the civil service examination system and promoted Confucian education, such as setting up state schools. Only 20-30 men passed the civil service exams per year. The upper class was becoming more bookish. In this period, education in Confucian texts and commitment to government service was seen as compatible with Daoism or Buddhism. The arts also attracted men good at calligraphy. Almost all educated men wrote poetry, and poetic composition was an important part of the civil service exam. Over 48,000 poems by 2,200 Tang poets still survive today.

Let’s take a moment to talk about Tang women. There were several very powerful women at this period of time, including Empress Wu in the late seventh century. She began as a concubine but had such influence that Gaozong ousted his previous empress and installed her. After Gaozong had a stroke she took charge and maintained control during the reigns of her two sons, whom she deposed. She declared herself Empress of a new dynasty, making her the only Empress in Chinese history. She was not deposed until 705 when she was over 80 and ailing.

It was during the reign of Xuanzong, a grandson of Empress Wu, that the court became the focal point of high culture. Xuanzong reigned in 712-56. Buddhist and Daoist clerics were invited to his court. He established a new academy for poets. Because of threats from Turks, Uighers, and Tibetans he restructured the defense system.

He is remembered for falling in love when nearly sixty with Yang Guifei, known for music and dancing. The love was complicated by her attraction to An Lushan, one of the recently nonChinese military governors. Xuanzong gave An Lushan many favors and allowed him to amass 160,000 troops along the northern frontiers. In 755 he rebelled and marched on the capital causing Xuanzong to flee. Xuanzong was forced by his troops to have Yang Guifei
strangled. When he abdicated the throne, this marked the end of the most brilliant time of court culture.

So while the Tang Period was a great time of trade and exchange of ideas, with people coming and going and where the Chinese learned that they were not the center of the universe, by the late Tang period, in 841, things really shifted. There was more of a digging in and questions about Chinese identity became important, reinvigorating Confucianism. There was opposition to Buddhism as a quarter million monks and nuns returned to lay life. There was also widespread closing of monasteries and chapels.